BLESSBEMER
2
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Table of Contents

Color Illustrations
Prologue: From Death, Life
Chapter One: After a God Dies
Chapter Two: Another Land’s God
Chapter Three: A God’s Homecoming
Chapter Four: The One Sent by a God
Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

"Yuki!"
Sleipnir
A prototype vehicle Yukinari made from parts of the statue of the guardian saint. Essentially a four-wheeled motorcycle. Runs on holy oil.
At Dasa's cry, Yukinari immediately looked to both sides. Branches were extending from the left and the right, as if to block off the road. They were just plants–they shouldn't have even possessed the ability to move–but they were advancing so quickly that it was visible to the naked eye. And they were trying to stop Yukinari and Dasa.

"L... Lord Y-Yukinari...?"
Berta could see him on the demigod's back. A weird knight in blue and black armor, with wings of dark crystal.
The one she worshipped.
Friedland's protector god.
"Yaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaa ahhhhhhh hhhh!"

CONTENTS

Prologue: From Death, Life

Chapter One: After a God Dies

Chapter Two: Another Land's God

Chapter Three: A God's Homecoming

Chapter Four: The One Sent by a God

Prologue: From Death, Life

Deep in the woods, under tree cover so dense the forest floor was poorly lit even at noon, Ulrike knew her end had come.

“……Ah……”

Her open eyes reflected a dark-green world. There were no other people around, not even any birds or animals; there was only the light that filtered through the branches, slicing the dim darkness into parts and drawing strange patterns.

It would most likely be the last thing she ever saw.

“……Ah……Ah…”

She was no longer able to form proper words. And no wonder—the branch of a fallen tree pierced her temple. It was a miracle that she was still conscious at all, even if only just.

“……Oh…Ah…”

It was her bad luck that a sharp branch had been pointing straight up where she fell. Worse luck still that she had fallen sideways. The temples are the thinnest part of the skull, so soft that even a branch, given the right angle and force, can pierce them.

Yes. That was all Ulrike was: unlucky.

She had only come to the forest in the first place to gather mushrooms. Gathering wild mushrooms was a task often left to children, for it did not demand the strength of field work. Ulrike knew well where to find the mushrooms she sought and what kinds to pick, where there might be dangerous animals, where deadly rocks or cliffs awaited. She could have found them with her eyes closed. Or at least, she had been fully convinced she could when she set off into the woods.

And now, that overconfidence would prove fatal.

She hadn’t noticed that part of the slope was still slippery from the rainstorms that had soaked the area right up until the day before. Planning to take the same “shortcut” she always did, Ulrike had traversed the boulders that dotted the area, hopping from one to the next. The leaf mold was soft, making it difficult to walk as she struggled to gain footing.

In the split second she jumped onto the rock, her world turned upside down. She’d reached out a hand that grasped nothing but air. And then she was caught up in a landslide, helpless, her small body slamming against one rock and then another as she tumbled.

At the end of the last bounce, the branch of that fallen tree had been waiting for her.

“…Ah……gah…ah…”

She could barely comprehend what had happened to her. But she was going numb already; there was no sensation, no pain. Just her vision, slowly turning crimson.

I’m… going to d… die…

She felt only a striking tranquility, a resignation. Strangely, she wasn't scared. Only sad that she wouldn't see her parents again.

It had been only a little over ten years since she had entered this world—not a long life by any measure—yet she found memories floating through her mind. Although her life had not been rich or full, this was only normal in her experience, and she didn't resent it. She remembered:

The time she'd been eating stew, and her mother smiled at her.

The time she'd been scolded for taking out her father's farming tools.

The time she'd fought with her friend over something trivial.

The first time she'd held a newborn kitten.

The time she'd been caught in a landslide that tore away half her roots.

The time several branches had broken, unable to bear the weight of the snow.

And then—

…What's… happen…ing…?

Something strange mixed with her memories. They weren't her memories alone. Someone else's recollections were there, too. No—not some*one* else, but some*thing* else. These weren't human memories. Humans didn't have roots or leaves or branches. They certainly didn't taste the sweetness of the sunlight.

I… I… I…

Her consciousness slowly began to expand, like a single drop of blood spreading through a pool of water. That was when Ulrike noticed a single green bud pushing out of the trunk of the fallen tree. It had two healthy leaves, and the light through the treetops shone on it.

It was so young, it looked like she could have broken it in half at a touch. But even the countless, towering trees of this forest had begun as sprouts no bigger than this.

Suddenly, Ulrike remembered something her father had told her while he was at work in the fields. *It takes more than light and water for trees and grass to grow*, he'd said. They might grow with those two things alone, but they wouldn't be healthy, abundant.

They needed something called "fertilizer"—something made of the excrement and decayed corpses of animals and birds, mixed with soil. The animals, which eat plants, would one day die, become earth, and help the plants grow full and strong.

So… will I…?

Die. Rot. Eventually, become a tree in this forest.

No. She wouldn't have to wait until she rotted. This fallen tree already connected her to that young bud. She was already in the process of becoming nutrients for it—becoming a part of it.

She had neither the knowledge nor the wisdom to fully understand what that meant, and anyway, the power of complex thought was beyond her now.

She made no sound as her heart stopped beating.

A soft rain began to fall on the forest, as if mourning her death. Some drops landed on thick branches, others were caught by layers of leaves, but some fell on her body, and on the tiny life beside her rejoicing in its birth.

Chapter One: After a God Dies

“Hrk—!”

A blade-like talon slashed through the air. Given the effect it had, it might as well have been an actual blade. Several small bushes in its path went flying into the air the moment it touched them, as if they had been cut with a giant scythe.

It was sharp, and huge, and strong. If it struck an average human, it would probably take off their arm—or leg, or head, or whatever it caught. It wasn’t even trying to cut anything—just to grab. Even that was enough to kill a person easily. This was no ordinary power of destruction.

To anger such a creature would surely be to invite death. It could kill any mere human in a single blow; its overwhelming power amounted to authority over life and death.

And that was why, with fear and trembling, such creatures were called “gods.”

“Feh...!”

Yukinari gave a cluck of his tongue as he ducked just low enough to evade the claw.

“You’re no slouch, huh...!”

At what he judged to be the best moment, he moved forward—and the demigod, as though it had been waiting, attacked. This couldn’t be chance. It was clearly intentional.

This was what was called a “counter.” It didn’t simply mean the opponent’s attack was hard to avoid; Yukinari’s own momentum would be used against him. If he had been a fraction of a second slower to duck, it was likely he would no longer possess the top half of his body.

They were called “demigods”: those who wished to become the local erdgod. Then again, one might emphasize that they were *demi*gods—from Yukinari’s perspective, barely gods at all. They hadn’t become true gods yet; they were just pretending to be.

But the power in their bizarre bodies was already close enough to that of a deity. As the earlier attack had revealed, a demigod had intelligence close to that of a human and wasn’t afraid to use it. A demigod knew how to apply their powers, and a single human pitted against one of these beasts could never hope to match it. He could only be overwhelmed and destroyed.

“You friggin’ monster!”

Yet as Yukinari shouted, there was no fear on his face. He knew that gods were not absolute, and they were not invincible. He didn’t have to bow before them and beg for mercy. He was their enemy, someone with power close to their own.

The demigod roared as if in response: “Gryyyaaaahhhh!” The sound bounced off the cliffs on either side.

Yukinari and the demigod were in a valley. To the left and right were cliffsides, walls of stone that wound about in dizzying layers. It was not a very deep valley, but the rocks were hard; there were few places to hide and nowhere to run.

Yukinari moved forward again. As he did so, he swung something in his hand to the right—it was an attempt to take off his enemy's head, but like the demigod's claw, it met only air. The demigod had avoided it with an agile backward move.

"Grr!" Yukinari clucked his tongue again and pressed forward. This time he stretched out his arm and torso and brought his beloved weapon—Durandall—up in a rising sweep. But the blow again failed to strike home.

He couldn't reach the thing. The demigod began to rise, even as it kept sliding backward.

"Get down here, you oversized roast chicken!"

"Grrryyyahhhhh!" The demigod spread its wings tauntingly as Yukinari stared daggers at it.

This demigod was a bird, if that was the word for it. Yukinari knew of no other way to describe a creature that had wings and feathers and flew through the air.

But its body was something vastly different from the image the word "bird" brought to mind. It could only ever qualify as a monstrosity of a bird. It had four massive wings on its back, its talons were long enough to pick up a cow or a horse, to say nothing of a human, and in addition to its beak, it boasted fangs and horns.

From several meters in the air, the demigod gave a cock of its head.

"Roa—st chic—ken. whAt iS That?"

The ability to speak proved its intelligence approached a human's. Its mouth and throat were constructed differently from a person's, making its voice screechy and hard to listen to, but Yukinari could understand it perfectly well.

"It's something we eat for dinner," he said. "And you better believe we would never let *it* eat *us*! You oughta learn what birds are for." He prepared Durandall for another attack. "So come on down here like a good little chicken. I'll pluck out your feathers and cook you right up!"

"whaT stRAnge thinGs yoU sAy. HuMAns eat anImals, godS eAt huMans. It is naTurE's Law."

The hideous *grryaaah!* that accompanied its words must have been laughter.

"Like hell it is. I think they changed the definition of nature's law since you looked it up last."

"YOU youRself dO not sEEm to kNOw whAt hUmAns are FoR. Do yOu thiNK to eAt a gOD?"

The creature rose even further into the air. Up and up, to a great height—and then it spun. It fell—no, dove—so fast it produced a roar, as though the air itself were crying out in terror.

Yukinari leaped forward to avoid the diving attack, but just when he thought the demigod would slam into the ground, it opened its wings, pushing off the rock face to change direction. Its massive body slipped through the air, following him.

Its claw slashed again. Yukinari ducked once more to dodge it—but he misjudged his movement by the tiniest bit, and the talon brushed the back of his black leather jacket, leaving a long tear.

“Gryaaah! Gryyaah! yOu hAVE no hOpe!” The demigod was jubilant as it began to ascend once more. “swIng your SWORD, iT cannOT reAch mE. Or wiLL yoU trY thrOWing iT? BY RighTs, yOU wHo crawl oN the Ground arE bUt playThings for Me, whO fLIEs iN the SKy!”

Yukinari grunted and adjusted his grip on the sword the demigod spoke of—Durandall—and looked at the sky in frustration. The demigod could come down to attack him, but his sword couldn’t possibly reach the creature where it hovered in the air. He could try to catch it just as it was attacking, of course, but that meant the demigod would always hold the initiative.

“Now what am I gonna do...?”

“DO yOu sEE noW? StAy yoUr hanD, and Be EAten. It iS youR desTINy to noUrish mE.”

And then the birdlike demigod began another dive.

“Pfft,” Yukinari said. “I was just playing you.”

A crack rang out, an explosion as loud as thunder. In the next instant, the onrushing demigod pitched violently.

“whAT—is thIS—?!”

It looked at Yukinari—at the weapon he held. A wisp of smoke rose from an oddly large piece attached just above the blade: a cylinder of steel that had produced the noise of a moment earlier.

It was a gun.

To the untrained eye, Yukinari’s blade Durandall might look like nothing more than a roughly-constructed longsword. But in fact, it included a Randall—a sawed-off Winchester M-92 lever-action rifle—in what amounted to a sword-gun.

“Grryah...”

The .44 Magnum bullet from Yukinari’s weapon had lodged itself deep in the demigod’s head. This time, it was the demigod who had suffered a counterattack. As quick as its reflexes may have been, it could not dodge a ball of steel coming at it faster than the speed of sound.

“Grrrryahh!”

Even with blood gushing from its head, the demigod continued to glide at Yukinari as if hoping to snatch him up. Its closely layered feathers seemed to have acted as natural bullet-proofing, blunting the power of the shot somewhat. The flow of blood soon stopped as well. Smart enough to call itself a god, the creature seemed to understand that it couldn’t let itself bleed out, although how it had stopped the bleeding, Yukinari didn’t know.

“Should’ve used steel-tipped bullets, not hollow-point,” he muttered, turning his back as he worked the loading lever, putting the next bullet in the chamber. And then…

“—Dasa.”

“…Mm.”

The next shot did not sound from Durandall.

When had she gotten there? Behind Yukinari, on top of a large-ish rock, was a girl wielding a crude-looking gun.

She was very pretty: silver hair trimmed neatly to shoulder length, blue eyes blinking behind her glasses. Her cheeks were as white and smooth as a piece of pottery; she was as beautiful as if a finely made doll had come to life.

Dasa Urban. To Yukinari, she was like a sister, a savior—a partner.

There was a silence. The gun Dasa used, “Red Chili,” was a revolver with a bipod and scope for sniper work. It took the same .44-caliber Magnum bullets as Durandall. It was of a construction known as “single action,” a relatively old style popular back when the West was being won.

There was another roar. Another and another.

“Grryaaahh?!”

The demigod screeched. Red blossoms bloomed across its body, showing where bullets had hit. Several of them, in the blink of an eye. Fanning. Rather than cocking the gun and then pulling the trigger in two distinct steps, the right hand steadies the gun and holds the trigger down, while the left quickly works the hammer. The quick motion of the left hand resembles someone fanning themselves, hence the name. The technique is specifically for revolvers, and an experienced shooter can let off six bullets so fast that the effect is almost like a machine gun; the sound of the shots becomes one continuous roar. Dasa, though, was not at that point yet.

The demigod began to garble its words, perhaps from shock. “whAt whaT wHat maNNer of weaP wEap weAPyyyahh!”

Even if its skin or feathers were almost as good as a bulletproof vest, six Magnum rounds would have an effect. The creature began to weave through the air—it brushed the ground as it found itself unable to stay aloft, gave a great bounce, and slammed into a rock wall.

“Got a bit too into playing god, birdbrain? Do me a favor and die.”

Durandall howled as it finished the fight.

“Gyygrahh…!”

The demigod’s head snapped back, turning red. However strong its defense was, two or three shots concentrated in the same area would penetrate deep into its body. That required a certain precision on the part of the shooter, of course—something much easier to achieve when the target was collapsed on the ground, unable to move.

“Grah…”

The body slumped over, twitched briefly, and then went still.

“That’s it for him, then,” Yukinari said with a sigh. “You can come out now.” He was speaking in the direction of a nearby boulder. About ten people emerged, looking absolutely terrified.

“Honored... Honored erdgod?” one of them asked.

“I’m not—” Yukinari started, then seemed to change his mind. “Sorry, I guess I am.” He scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

“Did you... fell that demigod? All by yourself?”

“Well, I had help,” he said, glancing at Dasa.

The people who were accompanying him on this survey knew that Yukinari was “the Godslayer,” but they had never actually seen him fight. To them, the battle that played out before their eyes must have seemed like a dream, or an illusion. From what they saw, two seemingly ordinary humans had just killed a god—a fantastical story if there ever was one.

Yukinari was just saying, “All right, back to our survey,” when a sharp cry from Dasa called his attention.

“Yuki!”

He immediately spun around to find the demigod he thought he had killed taking a great leap. Then the birdlike creature was rising into the air, its four wings producing a tremendous wind.

“Thanatosis?!” Yukinari shouted, looking up.

Some animals “play dead” when confronted with an especially powerful enemy. Apparently, the demigod had only been pretending to be defeated so Yukinari would let down his guard. He had only his own inattentiveness to blame.

The massive size of the demigod was not one any bird or animal would have attained in the normal course of growth. In most cases, an older creature became the “core” to which a dozen or even several dozen other animals would become spiritually bound. They came to look like a single, massive entity.

When the demigod died, the bond would be broken and the various animals that composed it would be separated. But this one hadn’t shown any sign of falling apart—that should have been proof enough that it wasn’t really dead.

Yukinari brought Durandall to bear as fast as he could.

“I won’t let you go, you—!”

But the monster was ascending strenuously. Yukinari looked at its back and let out a little breath. It was already out of range.

“Eh. That oughta teach him a thing or two, anyway.”

Yukinari didn’t have a special hatred for or grudge against this demigod. He had simply fought back when it attacked. If it wanted to run away, he didn’t care.

Dasa rendered her verdict immediately:

“You’re being foolish... Yuki.”

Her face rarely showed her emotions or gave any hint of what was going on inside her, but at this moment she almost looked proud of herself, even if

only Yukinari, who had known her much longer than anyone else there, noticed it.

“Foolish? How’s that?”

“That’s... a bird. They can’t remember anything... for more... than three steps. It won’t learn.”

“...That right?” Yukinari smiled grimly, watching the retreating demigod. To him, it didn’t look like it had any interest in coming back.

●

Friedland was a frontier town. It was far away from the capital, for better and for worse: it received no significant support, but also had a certain administrative freedom. So long as taxes were paid and the local trade routes were kept open, its duties were fulfilled.

Such remote cities had not begun as part of a concerted effort by the capital to colonize untamed lands. Rather, they were the cumulative result of expeditions sent by the king, which found villages or even small kingdoms already in these areas. These settlements would become part of the royal purview, not always voluntarily. Often, the people who were already running these areas were simply dubbed mayors or provincial lords.

Many of these localities, of course, had different cultures and customs from those of the capital. One such was the anonymous cult that revered the erdgods—and made sacrifices to them. An erdgod was a deity that had formed a spiritual link with a specific place, and ruled it in more senses than one. The erdgod’s blessing could bring abundance to the land and keep demigods and xenobeasts at bay.

But such protection usually came at a cost. In Friedland, this had been the regular presentation of living sacrifices. Every few years, a young maiden would be offered to the erdgod. The priesthood existed to support this ritual, and they ran an orphanage to ensure the town would have a steady supply of sacrifices. This became a social institution, and had continued for hundreds of years.

And then, one day, that “tradition” abruptly ended.

This was due to travelers who had come to the area—just one of them, really, a young boy. Yukinari Amano. His hair was snow-white, his eyes blood-red, but otherwise he appeared to be a completely normal human boy. He had stumbled into the middle of the ceremony and killed the erdgod that had been about to eat its sacrifice.

The result was a vacancy; Friedland was left without an erdgod. This meant two major problems were likely to occur: the villagers would once again be subject, as we said, to the threat of demigods and xenobeasts, and the harvest would be less fruitful. Yukinari solved the former problem by taking the role of erdgod himself. But as for the latter—it was not so easily fixed.

“All right,” Yukinari said. “Let’s stop here and have some lunch.” He looked back over his shoulder. The ten Friedlanders who had accompanied

him on this survey were lined up behind him. Eight men, two women. Add Yukinari and Dasa, and they made a twelve-person survey corps.

“Lord Yukinari!” a small woman said, running up to him. Her flaxen hair was in braids, her amber eyes were gentle, and her chest gave the impression of being large. Her movements and expressions were reserved and mature, but whether this made one want to protect her or bully her depended on the person. Not that she seemed to realize this.

“You must be tired. Here…” She held out a canteen.

Her name was Berta Wohmann. She was a former sacrifice, and the reason Yukinari had killed the erdgod. With the deity gone, she was offered to Yukinari instead, and was now widely recognized as Yukinari’s “property.” Yukinari himself didn’t specifically want this, but Berta had nowhere else to go, and he couldn’t leave her to fend for herself. And so, she attempted to serve him whenever possible. But…

“That’s not… necessary.”

It was not Yukinari, but Dasa who rebuffed Berta’s attempt to be helpful. She showed no more expression than usual, but a hint of annoyance entered her tone. Even though, again, Yukinari was probably the only one who noticed.

“But, Lady Dasa—”

“Yuki will drink… this.” She slid the bag she always carried off her back and dug through it to bring out a small bottle.

“What’s that…?”

“It has special nutrients,” Dasa said with an unmistakable note of triumph. “A drink I… prepared. My older sister was an alchemist. So… of course I know how… to make things like this.”

Berta let out a breath, her expression somewhat overwhelmed. Dasa made sure Berta could see her hand the bottle to Yukinari.

“Yuki, drink.”

“No, hang on a second.” He seemed gripped with a sense of foreboding. “What you know how to make is alchemical *medicines*, right?”

“So?”

“So that’s not the same as making food.” He paused. “Have you tasted this stuff?”

“Don’t need to. I followed… the recipe exactly.”

“That’s when you most need to taste it. I guarantee it didn’t come out like you expected.” Yukinari looked like he was about to heave a sigh.

Dasa was indeed the younger sister of the alchemist Jirina Urban, and had served as her sister’s assistant. She was well-versed in certain kinds of knowledge, but her long period of blindness meant she had never been allowed to help with crafting or the other work of actual production, and her practical experience was almost zero. She was working from theoretical knowledge alone.

Back when the two of them had been traveling, she had attempted to cook several times. Her tendency to simply follow the steps in the recipe

without ever tasting or adjusting anything meant that her efforts lacked a certain spontaneity; they didn't account for the ingredients she actually had on hand. The results were inevitably too sweet, or too spicy, or too bitter. In due course, Yukinari learned to handle the cooking himself.

"...Yuki." Dasa's blue eyes peered up at him through her spectacles. "Do you mean you... like Berta's water better?"

"This is the dumbest argument I've ever seen... Look, it's not about you or Berta. I just want water, period. I mean... I appreciate your making that just for me, but..."

There was a very long pause. "Fine," Dasa said at length. With a nod, she exchanged the bottle she was holding for a different one from her bag. "It's distilled water. Drink."

"That seems like a little much to go through for drinking water, doesn't it?"

Yukinari understood boiling water to kill bacteria, but specifically distilling all their drinking water would have been a laborious process. Although, to the extent that it got rid of most bad things in the water, it certainly was good to drink.

Regardless, if he continued to reject her offers, Dasa's mood would only get worse. She wasn't the type to shout or sulk, but her angry silence could be profound. Once she got like that, it would take a good deal of time and effort to bring her back around.

“Give it here,” Yukinari said, accepting the bottle from Dasa.

Then Berta, who had been watching all this unfold without a word, smiled and said, “Now, Lord Yukinari, please have something to eat.” She offered him a small bundle.

“That’s not… necessary,” Dasa broke in again.

“Uh, actually, Dasa, it is necessary. Definitely necessary.”

“Yuki, eat this,” Dasa said, bringing the “nutrient-rich liquid” back from its brief stint in her bag.

“Pretty sure that’s a drink.”

“It’s full of nutrients.”

“And that’s great. But I just want to eat a normal meal!” Yukinari’s voice was close to a desperate shout. Dasa seemed bent on competing with Berta in every possible way. Berta usually backed down, so it never came to an actual fight, but Yukinari felt a little bad for the other girl constantly having to contend with his companion.

There was also the fact that he didn’t trust Dasa when it came to food, and felt safer eating Berta’s meal… But actually saying so would send Dasa into a pout if anything would.

The third and final girl in the survey group came over to them, sounding annoyed:

“What are you doing?”

Fiona Schillings. With her light golden hair and jade-green eyes, she was truly beautiful. Her facial features were well-formed, giving an impression of personal strength. She was the polar opposite of Berta in a number of ways. If Berta was the submissive type, Fiona was outgoing, seemingly always ready to take the lead and show the way.

It was only natural—Fiona was the mayor’s daughter and had taken over the day-to-day duties of running the town when her father became bedridden with illness. It wasn’t a position in which she could simply wait for others to tell her what to do. Yukinari didn’t know whether Fiona had always been so proactive or if it was a trait she had developed as she tried to fill her father’s shoes.

Now she had her long hair tied back behind her head, perhaps to keep it from getting in her or anyone else’s way while they were surveying. In combination with her cold demeanor, it gave her a somehow mature look—and yet cute, suited to her age.

“Oh, we were, uh… nothing…” Yukinari said, in a poor attempt to distract her. It would have been easy enough to explain that Dasa and Berta were finding little ways to fight over him, but the thought made him feel very self-conscious, and he was too embarrassed to voice it.

“By the way, what do you plan to do about that?” Fiona pointed ahead of them to where a boulder the size of a small house blocked their path. Cliffs closed in on either side of it, so unless they could climb over it, they were at a dead end. This was the reason Yukinari had called a halt here.

“What do you mean, what?”

“As long as that thing’s there, we won’t be getting any water.”

Yukinari had no ability to directly control the land as most erdgods did. But one didn’t have to be a god in order to improve the farming situation. He felt the first order of business should be to procure plenty of water, and he drew up blueprints for an irrigation canal that would run from the lake in the north to the vicinity of the town.

But there was quite some distance between the lake and the fields. An irrigation canal that ran all the way from one to the other would require a huge amount of work to build. They were here to investigate whether they could channel water through this valley, which lay in between the two. If possible, Yukinari hoped to complete construction on the canal before they went home. Hence, several of the people of Friedland had come with him.

His response to Fiona was unconcerned. “Oh, that? It’s not that big. We’ll work something out.”

“Just like that?”

“Hmm. Maybe we ought to go ahead and do something about it. Berta!”

“Yes, Lord Yukinari?” Berta responded, happy he had called her by her name.

“Tell everyone to keep their lunches packed for a few minutes still,” he said. “I would hate for their food to get all dusty.”

“Dusty, my Lord…?”

“Yeah. Just let them know.”

And then Yukinari started walking toward the huge rock.

As he went, he reached into his brain for various bits of knowledge. Chemical structural formulae. Material calculations. All were things he’d learned in his “previous world,” but before his “rebirth,” he’d barely called them to mind. It was only since obtaining this body that he had become able to access the memories of his past at will.

They say the human brain never loses information it has seen even just a single time. But many people are unable to reach those memories—to bring them into the conscious mind. Because the amount of information we can deal with at one time is limited, many memories recede into the depths of the mind over time.

But Yukinari was able to call up any of his memories as if searching through a computer database. Perhaps this was because those memories were in “parallel” after he died, or perhaps it was a special quality of this body—he didn’t know.

Silently, he touched the boulder with his right hand. He made some broad mental calculations, then focused his attention.

“…Mrm.”

A pale blue light seeped into the rock from the palm of his hand. It only took a few seconds. Then he looked back and said, “Everyone, back up a bit, please! This could get messy. Oh, and just for safety’s sake, cover your ears.”

Several of the people with him stood there looking as if they didn't understand what he was saying, and Fiona ordered them to block their ears and take a step back.

"Welp, here goes."

He focused on the boulder, then backed up ten meters or so. He quickly drew Durandall from its holster on his back and fired at the place he had touched a moment ago.

There was a dull, quiet explosion. The next moment, the very presence of the boulder seemed to give way, and the instant after that, it was a pile of minuscule fragments on the valley floor. Some of the rock had turned into dust that floated on the breeze, but not much of it reached where Berta and the others were waiting. The surprisingly quiet explosion was proof that, although quick and dirty, his calculations had been largely correct—the sound of a blast was just unused energy escaping into the air.

"Yukinari…!"

He turned around to find Fiona standing behind him, her eyes wide. Dasa and Berta joined her a moment later.

"What in the world did you do?"

"I guess the words 'physical reconstitution' wouldn't mean anything to you…?" He gave a helpless smile. "But you know explosive powder, right?"

"Well… More or less." Fiona's response was noncommittal. She seemed to know of its existence, but had never seen it in action before Yukinari came to Friedland. The method of its production was probably not widely known; to the average person, it was likely as rare as gold or silver.

"It's because I'm an 'angel.' I can change dust into gold, and I can definitely change part of a rock into black powder. That's how I destroyed the boulder. I guess I could've just transformed it wholesale into something more useful, but there's a limit to how much physical material I can alter at one time." Hence why he hadn't been able to simply turn the rock into pure air.

"You really are an angel, aren't you?" Fiona said, sounding deeply impressed.

"What, you're surprised? You've seen me use my power before."

"I suppose so. But only when you were fighting. And you try to avoid using it even then."

"'S true, I guess." Yukinari fixed an ambiguous smile on his face. Then he asked, "Does it upset you?"

The "angels" were artificial humans created by a religious organization called the True Church of Harris for the purpose of evangelism. Produced using the best alchemy available, they were living alchemical devices that made for an easily digestible "divine miracle." They were almost like mascots, a way of drawing people to the faith. And what did a mascot need with a sense of self? They were merely tools for the Church.

A human soul was apparently necessary to start these man-made dolls working, but the soul was to the angel as a pilot light is to a furnace. Just a

way of starting things. Once the artificial person's heart began to beat, the humanity the original soul bore with it was stripped away, eliminated like an impurity.

But Jirina Urban—the one who had made Yukinari's body—had not destroyed his selfhood, though he didn't know why. Whatever her reasons, she did it in defiance of her orders, and was killed as a traitor to the Church.

But regardless—

"Upset me? Not especially," Fiona said. "Although I think it's pathetic that you can kill an erdgod, but not win an argument with Dasa."

"Okay. I didn't mean that kind of upset."

"I told you, you don't look any different from a normal human. You just seem to have some unusual abilities. But I guess saying that is sacrilege now, isn't it, O god?" Fiona said with a teasing lilt. "Honestly, I was just surprised."

"...Huh." Yukinari shrugged. He had been concerned that, confronted with a fresh reminder that he wasn't human, she might feel revulsion or disgust. But he need not have worried.

"If you don't believe me," Fiona said with a smirk, "shall I come to your bedroom tonight?" She had strong features, and her eyes were somewhat almond-shaped to begin with. When she squinted with her smile, she looked a bit like an amused cat.

"How would that prove anything?" Yukinari said.

"Yuki... you womanizer."

"Dasa, I told you not to take Fiona's jokes so seriously!"

The young girl was shooting him a resentful look from behind her glasses.

"You think that's a joke? I'm hurt."

"Do you enjoy tormenting me, Miss Deputy Mayor?"

"Torment a god? Perish the thought!" Fiona said, clearly enjoying herself.

"Oh, uh... of course, I also... offer myself..."

"Berta, you need to learn when Fiona's joking, too."

"Oh," Berta said. "Is... is she joking?" It seemed that Berta, at least, had been making a perfectly serious offer.

"Forget it. The map says our lake should be just up ahead, which means we'll have crossed the first hurdle to getting water. If the men could help clear the debris, I'd appreciate it. Oh, after they've finished eating is fine."

"Sure, of course," Fiona nodded. "We have no intention of making you do everything by yourself." Then she turned to the men, who had come closer to see what exactly had happened to the boulder, and started giving instructions. They had been dumbfounded by this "miracle" of Yukinari's, and seemed almost relieved to be given concrete orders. They all nodded at Fiona without a word of complaint.

"*Now* maybe I can get my meal in," Yukinari said, rubbing his shoulder with his right hand.

"Yuki, my special nutrient drink."

"...Okay, okay. Let me have it."

As the silver-haired girl handed him the bottle with something like a look of triumph on her face, Yukinari nodded at her, resigned.

●

The day's survey and construction work stopped before the sun went down. Or rather, a halt was called when the sun began to sink. Sunset would plunge the world into darkness. Besides the usual threats of demigods and xenobeasts, there would be wild animals with good night vision to worry about, and the chance of bandit attacks increased as well. To the citizens of Friedland, the lawless types who lived in the countryside might as well have been monsters.

Yukinari could slay all the gods he wanted, but protecting the ten defenseless villagers was his first priority. There would be no point making them work at such a dangerous time of day.

"Good work today, everyone," Fiona said, taking in the group at a glance. They had returned to town and would go their separate ways at the square Friedland used for special events. This area had originally been used to prepare for religious rituals—that is, to ready the sacrifices before they were sent out to the erdgod. Because of that, it was naturally located near the sanctuary where the priests lived.

Incidentally, the structure set up for the observation of the ritual was also called a sanctuary, perhaps because it too was administered by the priesthood. To the extent that a sanctuary is supposed to be home to a deity and not the deity's priests, it was this latter "sanctuary" that most deserved the name. The building where the priests lived in town should perhaps have been called something else. But in Friedland both were called sanctuaries by tradition, and other than the sacrifices who went to the erdgod in the mountains once every two years, nobody deliberately went out to the wilderness sanctuary. Hence, when Friedlanders referred to "the sanctuary" in everyday conversation, they usually meant the one in the city.

"Have a good night," Fiona said, and then the men of the survey team each made a brief bow in Yukinari's direction before heading off to their respective homes.

It was now fully dark, and torches burned in the town square. The wavering flames produced complex plays of light and shadow.

Yukinari glanced over to see Berta looking at him with a confused expression. It seemed to contain a variety of emotions—as if she might be about to laugh, or cry, or not do either of those things.

"Berta?"

"Oh—yes?" She blinked when he said her name, then gave him a questioning look. "What do you need?"

“Are you all right? You almost looked like you were about to cry. Or—wait. That’s not it.” Yukinari stumbled, searching for the right words. “Anyway, you look like there’s a lot on your mind.”

“…It’s just, I… left from here.” Berta smiled as if at a fond memory. “And I didn’t… think I would ever come back.”

She was right: this was where she would have gone when she had been offered up as a sacrifice under the euphemism “shrine maiden,” and just beyond the sanctuary that faced the square was the orphanage where she had been raised. It must have been an emotional place for her.

She smiled, a hint of girlish shyness in her voice. “If I could go back and talk to myself then, I’d want to tell her. Tell her it was going to be all right, that she would come back here safely, in the company of someone better than she had ever imagined—could ever have imagined.” She spoke joyfully, placing both hands over her heart.

“Berta…” Yukinari looked at her for a fleeting moment—but it was enough to notice something in the window of the sanctuary. The shutters were open ever so slightly, and someone was peeking out. A priest, most likely. When his eyes met Yukinari’s, the shutters closed hurriedly.

“Yuki?” Dasa said, studying his face. “What’s… wrong?”

“Oh… It’s nothing.”

“Were… you… looking at Berta?” Yukinari had been looking at the building behind Berta, so from Dasa’s perspective it must have appeared as though he were looking at the other girl. “At her… chest, I suppose?”

“Whatever. No, I wasn’t looking at Berta. I was looking at that building,” Yukinari said, indicating the place where the priests lived. “The priests were watching me.”

“…Oh.” Her blue eyes blinked.

“That’s all. Anyway, can’t say I’m surprised. Nothing for you to worry about, Dasa.”

“But, Yuki…”

“Really. Don’t worry.” He smiled as he spoke, and reached out to touch Dasa’s cheek. Dasa had been born with cataracts and had been unable to see for much of her life. Yukinari had produced artificial lenses that gave her vision almost as good as an average person’s, but even so, she never seemed quite comfortable relying on sight alone. A hand on her cheek or in her hair was much more reassuring to her than words alone.

Now she placed her hand over Yukinari’s, as if feeling his body heat. Coming from a girl who rarely showed much emotion, such gestures were heartwarming. Yukinari moved his hand slightly, rubbing her cheek. Dasa narrowed her eyes like a happy cat and smiled a little.

Fiona, having dismissed the other members of the survey team, spoke up. “Yukinari. I’d like to talk about our plans for tomorrow. Will you come over to the mansion? With Dasa and Berta, of course. I can have rooms prepared for you for tonight.”

Currently, Yukinari, Dasa, and Berta were staying in the sanctuary—the one some distance from town. On the spot where the sanctuary of the erdgod had once stood, an impromptu dwelling had been built, but it was impossible to avoid the impression that it had been hastily constructed. It was solid enough to keep out the elements, but the toilet, bath, and other amenities were difficult to use.

"That'd be great. It would make my day if I could take advantage of the bath while I'm there, too."

Fiona nodded with a wry smile.

The bath at the Schillings mansion was drawn from a nearby wellspring, which meant there was plenty of hot water to bathe with. Incidentally, Yukinari had asked if it might be possible to cool the water down and use it for agriculture, but the same idea had occurred to Fiona at some earlier time, and had already been tried. Apparently, there was some kind of issue with the water quality that made it unsuitable to use for crops.

"Allow me to wash your back, Lord Yukinari."

"Ooh, great idea," Fiona chimed in. "Let's all bathe together."

"...Womanizer."

"Dasa, please, you have got to understand I didn't ask for this!" Yukinari said, his shoulders slumping under her glare.

The map of the area lay open on the floor of the Schillings' parlor. This was chiefly because the house lacked a table of sufficient size to hold the map—the dining table was long enough, but not wide enough—but now, Yukinari discovered some surprising advantages to viewing the map this way. If he stood up, he could take in the entire thing at a glance. Since he was charged with protecting all of Friedland and the surrounding area, this was a useful perspective.

Standing on the far side of the map, Fiona said, "So today, we got rid of the boulder at the pass. That opens up the shortest route between Friedland and the lake to the north. What do you have planned for tomorrow?"

Fiona wasn't the only woman looking at the map; Berta stood to Yukinari's right, and Dasa to his left. These seemed to have become the places they always occupied; it wasn't so much that they had chosen these spots as that Yukinari, half-unconsciously, usually stood with Dasa to his left. This led to Berta frequently being on his right.

"All we've done so far is get ourselves close to connecting the valley and the lake. We have to do more than just link them up and let the water flow. We'll need another controlled blast—to remove another obstacle like we did today—to connect the lake to Friedland. But it'll take some real preparation to get the water coming steadily. Right, Dasa?"

"Mn—agreed," was her response to Yukinari's attempt to involve her in the conversation.

From being an assistant to an alchemist, Dasa had experience with stills and similar equipment, as well as drugs and herbs, so she understood the

properties of fluids. The difference between a test tube and a canal, however great, was ultimately one of degree and not of kind.

"So," Yukinari went on, "I think this should be our last visit to the lake area for a while. Let's focus on digging a canal alongside the road. We can add branches that go to the fields, to make sure the water will have somewhere to go when it gets here. That's pretty much just physical labor, so I'll have the men handle it. I don't expect any trouble with demigods this close to town, and we can have several teams working at the same time. As for where we'll dig, we can follow my original map."

Of course, Yukinari could use his power as an angel to turn all the earth he touched into air or water or whatever he wanted. It would have been possible to dig the irrigation canal that way, but the truth was that physical reconstitution was not the most efficient way to do such work.

"I don't really think people are going to listen if I tell them to do something. So Fiona, I'll be counting on you to get them on the job."

"Sure thing. And... what will you be doing during that time, Yukinari?"

"I've got some ideas in mind. I'd like to improve the soil itself." For his answer, Yukinari pulled something that seemed helpful from his memories of his "previous world." He told her: "The soil in this area—it's not barren, but it's not rich, either. If we could make a simple fertilizer... No, wait. Maybe we should produce better farming tools first. Anyway, I want to figure out a way to give the land some life."

Growing crops in a concentrated area, such as a field, effectively exhausts the land. The plants put down roots that absorb the nutrients and air in the soil, turning it, for all practical purposes, into a wasteland. Yes, rain and air carry nitrogen, which can help nourish the plants, but in the long run it isn't enough. One can raise crops, and harvest them, but then the land must be allowed to rest—to lie fallow, soaking up the sun and regaining its nutrients. In a word, it has to regenerate itself. Friedland, needless to say, practiced this system of cultivation and rest, but in a primitive form; their broad calculations meant efficiency was poor.

The current state of the Friedlanders' farming tools seemed to include large plows pulled by horses or oxen. Yukinari couldn't help thinking that better equipment—not combines or complex machinery, mind you, just improved tools—might enable agriculture on a larger scale. The earth had been in use for so long that it had grown tough, hard to put roots into. Regular cultivation was necessary, but if possible he wanted to improve efficiency. Yukinari mulled over the possibilities, scouring his memories of his "previous world."

I might be able to create a simple motor, but an electric generator facility is probably asking too much. Once we get that irrigation canal set up, maybe we could manage a waterwheel? But...

The ease with which Yukinari had produced Durandall and Red Chili was thanks to the model guns he had disassembled in his previous world. He remembered doing a science experiment in elementary school where he had

made a basic motor by wrapping copper wire around a permanent magnet. But when it came to creating anything like an actual generator—well, that was somewhat beyond the knowledge of the average high schooler. Even though he understood the principles involved, he would have to work out the details by trial and error.

"Anyway, since I don't share a spiritual bond with the land or whatever, I can't just control it. I have to find other ways to make it do what I want."

"I see," Fiona said with an admiring nod. Having studied at the academy in the capital, she had by far the most knowledge of anyone in Friedland. And there was no doubt that she was a good thinker: she even seemed to understand what Yukinari was talking about without him having to break it down for her.

Berta, on the other hand, listened to all of this with a blank expression. It wasn't her fault; she had never had an opportunity to receive a proper education.

"I gather quicklime is a common fertilizer," Fiona said. "And I hear on the coast they use crushed shells—but that's expensive when you get inland."

"Sure. That's not so much an actual fertilizer," Yukinari replied. "It's more a way of improving the soil, or balancing the pH…"

"The pH…?" Even Fiona was thrown by this.

"We could be in for a very long talk if I go into the details. But… Hmm. Soil is actually like water; it can be 'soft' or 'hard' or somewhere in between. And different plants like different kinds of soil. So by putting the right plants in the right earth, you can get more out of them. Make sense?"

This world at least seemed to have basic soil-improvement techniques. But without a knowledge of chemistry, farmers could only take an educated guess at what would help. That, anyway, seemed to be where Friedland was technologically. And here, the productivity of the land was tied to more than simple environmental factors. Spiritual power or earth meridians or whatever it was the erdgod controlled entered into the equation, too. That made the situation so complicated that it might have been impossible for anyone to understand it well enough to spur technological progress.

"Look, I've been talking about an irrigation canal as if we only needed one. But once the main canal is ready, we'll need to dig supplementary canals to get water to each of the fields."

"Supplementary canals…" Fiona narrowed her eyes for a second as if in thought. "Meaning smaller canals to carry the water to the fields, right? And we would have to be able to dam them off or open them up depending on which fields were being rested at any given time, right?"

"Yes, exactly," Yukinari said, and then he regarded the deputy mayor with surprise. "You really are a quick study, aren't you, Fiona?"

"Wh-What, you're surprised? I mean, s-so what?"

It was an unusual reaction from Fiona, given that Yukinari had simply offered his honest opinion. She was clearly a bit flustered, as if it made her feel awkward.

"So nothing in particular. Just like I said. I always figured you were smart, but you really pick up on things quickly."

"It's not that complicated. Anyone with an education could have followed you…"

"I really don't think so. Some people are all knowledge and no intelligence."

Broadly speaking, there are two types of education a person can receive: one that deals in simple facts, or one that teaches how to think. The latter alone is meaningless, of course, but it does little good to be fixated on the former, either. It would be like someone having a huge collection of weapons and no idea how to fight: not very efficient, and not good for much. From that perspective, Fiona had an excellent balance in her education. She had covered everything and learned to be thoughtful and perceptive.

"It helps a lot that you're so quick. Honestly, I know a lot of things, but I'm not a great thinker, myself…"

"You're kidding. And anyway, I just got the education they give you in the capital."

"Some people get an education, but never figure out what to do with it," Yukinari said. Then it occurred to him: Fiona was probably the only person in Friedland to have gone away for higher education. The people of the village may have known she was smart, but they probably saw it as the simple product of having attended school in the capital. If they admired her for it, it was only as someone who had gone to be educated in a place that, for them, might as well have been a foreign country.

Chances were, very few people here understood the nature of Fiona's intelligence. Only Yukinari—and Dasa, perhaps—could evaluate it fairly.

This was why her reaction to his praise was a mixture of surprise, embarrassment, and pleasure.

As these thoughts ran through his head, Yukinari felt a pair of eyes staring at him. Specifically, blue eyes, from his left. Dasa was gazing at him through her glasses, as though she were waiting for something.

“Dasa?”

When he said her name, she wordlessly looked away. She almost appeared to be pouting—not almost, he realized. That was exactly what she was doing.

Ah, Yukinari thought, grasping the situation immediately. *Now I get it.*

“I know a thing or two about smart people,” he told Fiona. “I’ve had more than a little help from them.” As he spoke, he put his hand on Dasa’s head. Dasa no doubt had every bit as much trouble as Fiona did being properly recognized. Yukinari saw her as second only to Jirina in teaching him about this world. But her knowledge and thoughtfulness were so familiar to him that he rarely thought to remark on them.

“…Yuki.”

Dasa peered up at him from under the hand he was running through her hair. She didn’t like that he had heaped so much praise on Fiona and had none for her—or, to put it bluntly, she was jealous. Moments like this revealed her childish side. The special circumstances of her upbringing had left her somewhat unacquainted with proper social behavior—the result being that she could seem emotionally younger she was.

“Anyway.” Yukinari ran his hand gently through Dasa’s hair, wrapping some of the silver strands around his finger, with all the delicacy one would use in scratching a cat under the chin. “I’ll let you take care of the preparations for the irrigation canal. I’ll try to figure out if there’s anything else we can do.”

“All right. Let me know if you come up with anything.” Friedland’s deputy mayor looked first at Yukinari, then at Dasa, with a slightly crooked smile.

●

Night passed, and morning came. Yukinari and his companions left the Schillings mansion for their usual place of residence—Yukinari’s “sanctuary.”

As explained earlier, this was a single house built on what had once been the sanctuary of the erdgod. No one knew exactly if there were energy meridians in the earth, or lines of spiritual power running through this place—or something else altogether—but when demigods and xenobeasts came seeking the station of erdgod, this was where they most often went. That made it an ideal strongpoint to protect Friedland from these same threats, and Yukinari judged it unwise to be away from it for long.

“Turns out gods have their own problems,” he muttered as he walked along the main street, heading for the gate that led out of town. Yukinari

had no regrets about felling the erdgod, but he also had to admit that, excepting the need for living sacrifices, the erdgod "system" had been fairly effective. It had presumably arisen organically through long years of natural refinement, so it only made sense that it would do its job well.

"…Yuki," Dasa said suddenly. She pointed toward the gate. A lone man was standing there. For second, Yukinari thought it might be the gatekeeper, but his clothes were wrong. That blue outfit was familiar—priest's robes.

Yukinari stopped several meters short of the gate. Dasa and Berta came up alongside him and stopped, too.

"Berta," the middle-aged man said, walking toward them with a friendly smile. "You look well."

"…Yes," she said with a quiet smile of her own. "As do you, Master Luman."

Apparently, they knew each other. Given that the clergy ran the orphanage, Berta might very well have known every priest in town. Yukinari had met several of the priests as well, but this was the first he had seen of this "Luman." The priest had a square face, narrow eyes, and a large nose. The overall impression he gave was almost like a doll carved from wood—artless and unaffected.

Yukinari looked around silently. Now he saw them: priests, emerging from the shadows of surrounding buildings, forming a large circle around Yukinari and the two girls. Each of them wore a hard expression, but none could meet Yukinari's eyes when he looked at them.

Hmm…

When Yukinari had found himself involved in everything surrounding the erdgod, the priests had initially attempted to take Dasa as a hostage. This, at least, made them his enemies. But they had made themselves scarce during the trouble with the True Church of Harris, and that made whether or not they were hostile to him less clear.

The priests were no doubt aware that Yukinari had less than favorable feelings about men of the cloth. That was why they had gotten Luman, a priest he hadn't met before, to waylay him and his party.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

Yukinari thought about Durandall, holstered across his back. The priests knew about his power, so it was unlikely they would try a sudden attack. But as they had shown with their attempt to kidnap Dasa, they understood that a strong foe may still have a weakness that could be exploited. Even a god.

"Berta. We come to you today with an earnest supplication. We ask that you and the honored erdgod… Lord Yukinari… come with us to the orphanage."

"I—"

Berta looked to Yukinari for his reaction. She saw herself as his property, and so probably felt she had to let him decide.

“Berta,” Luman said softly. “Are you not a shrine maiden?” The words sounded gentle, like a mild reproach, but he was clearly not expecting her to talk back. “Shrine maidens exist to intercede with the gods. It is your duty to ask Lord Yukinari to accompany you to the orphanage.”

Berta looked at Luman and Yukinari, plainly torn. The priests had raised her like parents. Raised her to be a sacrifice, yes, but she had been indoctrinated into the idea that they must always be obeyed. She could not simply ignore Luman now.

It was just like how Yukinari and Hatsune, his older sister in his previous world, had been unable to abandon their mother even as she slipped away into the “new religion” she had found. Their father had seemed to leave her behind all too readily, but Yukinari and Hatsune were her children, and couldn’t simply forget about her the way they might have if she were a stranger.

The question is, what do they want?

He resented the priests, with their insistence on making Berta their go-between, but it couldn’t hurt to find out what they had in mind. He could go along for now—it didn’t mean he had any obligation to do anything for them later. Yukinari was a god now, and as such, it behooved him to forgive arrogance, capriciousness, even hypocrisy.

“Luman, right?” Yukinari’s eyes narrowed as he spoke.

“Yes, Yukina—Lord Yukinari.”

“Don’t make Berta do your work. If you have something to say to me, say it yourself. Berta—” He hesitated for an instant, but then pushed ahead: “—is mine now. She’s not your tool and she’s not your problem.”

“Lord Yukinari…” Berta’s face was shining for some reason, while Dasa’s brow had furrowed darkly, but Luman nodded, his expression undisturbed.

“Yes, I see. Fair enough. Then let me start again. Lord Yukinari, new god of our home of Friedland, I humbly request that you come to the orphanage and hear what we have to say.”

Yukinari left them hanging for a moment, then said, “…All right.”

At that, Luman and the other priests formed a line and set off walking toward the orphanage.

Berta whispered to Yukinari as he made to follow them. “Lord Yukinari.” Her hands were joined above her head in a simple gesture of prayer. “Thank you very much.”

“Don’t mention it,” Yukinari said, a wry grin tugging at his lips.

●

“Big Sis Berta! Lord Yukinari! Big Sis Dasa!”

Berta’s “little sisters” greeted them at the orphanage. None of the girls here had a family. Their parents had died, or abandoned them—in any case, they were children who wouldn’t be missed when they were eventually offered up as sacrifices to the erdgod. Because they protected the town by performing this “sacred duty,” their livelihood had been supported in large part by donations from the townspeople.

In fact, “had been supported” was now the best literal description. For all practical purposes, the orphanage’s chief role—producing sacrifices—was at an end.

“Hello there,” Yukinari said. He bent down and smiled at a girl he had met the last time he was there. “Hannah, right? How are you doing?”

“Great, Lord Yukinari!” She giggled, snuggling up like a kitten to the hand he held out.

“Hannah! You mustn’t be so familiar with Lord Yukinari—!”

“Aw, don’t worry about it.” Yukinari cut off Berta as she tried to scold her younger sister, then lifted his right arm, to which Hannah had attached herself. The young girl gave an innocent shout of joy, but the first thought that went through Yukinari’s mind was how light she was. Much lighter than she looked. Under her clothes, she was probably just skin and bones. He had lifted her on his arm in part because she looked gaunter than before—and indeed, she seemed to have lost weight. Life at the orphanage had never been luxurious, but it shouldn’t have been so destitute that a growing child became a skeleton.

“Ahem, Lord Yukinari,” Luman said, gesturing toward the interior of the orphanage. “If you will follow me. I’m sure the children would interrupt our talk out here.”

Yukinari forced a smile onto his face as he turned to Hannah and the other girls. “…Guess I’ll see you later, then.” Then he headed for the room Luman had indicated.

“Berta. As Lord Yukinari’s shrine maiden, we request you accompany him. Lady Dasa, if you would kindly wait out here.”

Dasa said nothing, but a deep frown crossed her face. She reached out for her bag, which she had set on the floor—no doubt because she hadn’t forgotten their last attempt to make her a hostage.

“It’s okay, Dasa,” Yukinari said. “You haven’t had a chance to chat with your little sisters in a long time.” He touched her silver-haired head.

“Little… sisters…?” Dasa blinked in perplexity.

“They called you ‘Big Sis Dasa,’ didn’t they?”

“Oh…” It was almost as though it hadn’t registered until he mentioned it. With some confusion, she looked back and forth between Yukinari and Hannah and the other girls.

“I’m… a big… sister?”

“From their perspective, sure. Go ahead and play with them.” Yukinari mussed her hair.

“…Mm.” Dasa narrowed her eyes happily.

“I’m gonna go in and have a chat. Just… keep Red Chili nearby, okay?”

“Okay.” Dasa made sure the clasp of her bag was undone, and Yukinari and Berta went into the next room.

“This way, please.” Luman ushered them into the room and offered them chairs. They seemed to be in some sort of parlor or receiving room. They sat not on a couch, but on hard, wooden chairs, six of which were spaced evenly

around a round table in the middle of the room. Luman sat across the table from Yukinari; Berta took her place to Yukinari's right.

"So. What do you want?" Yukinari asked.

Luman cleared his throat, then set his hands on the table, fingers interlaced.

"Lord Yukinari, it has now been something more than twelve days since you felled our previous erdgod and took up residence here."

"Yeah. Twelve days since your barbaric tradition of living sacrifices went out the window. Bet everyone's feeling pretty good about that." He didn't bother to hide the note of contempt in his voice, but Luman's expression didn't waver.

"Barbaric... Is that how you see it?"

"Damn right it is. What else would you call living sacrifices?" From the bottom of his heart, Yukinari believed it was awful.

Luman was silent for a moment, as if looking for the right words. Then he said:

"Very well. Everyone has their own opinion about our tradition, and it will do us no good to argue about it now. But at the very least, please understand that not everyone is 'feeling good' about the demise of our custom of sacrifices."

"Good point. You guys, for example." Yukinari kept Luman fixed with his glare. The erdgod no longer demanded sacrifices. That meant no more ritual, which meant no more need to raise sacrifices, which meant all these priests were out of a job.

"Your appearance here," Luman went on, ignoring Yukinari's jab, "has upset the order of things in this town."

"Oh, the order of things, huh?"

"Yes. The money to support this orphanage, for example. It was previously provided by donations from the townspeople, but with no need for sacrifices, donations have gone down. The attitude among the citizens is that they can barely afford to support themselves—let alone some mere orphans."

Yukinari said nothing. It wasn't just the orphanage, but the orphans—former candidates for sacrifice—who had lost their reason for being.

"And, yes, we priests have no ground to stand on, either. Now that the veneration of the erdgod is over, there is no need of priests to conduct the ritual."

"...Figured."

"You, Lord Yukinari, are the erdgod of this land now. ...And we have one request we would humbly make of you." Luman leaned in ever so slightly as he spoke. Apparently, he was coming to his point.

Truth be told, Yukinari had come in with a pretty good sense of how the conversation would go up to this point. But he wanted to hear the priest say it himself.

“At present, you deliver all of your instructions to the townspeople through the deputy mayor, Miss Fiona Schillings. We ask that, in the future, you allow us to act as your intermediaries.”

About what I expected, Yukinari thought. The erdgod no longer demanded sacrifices—but there was a new source of power and authority. It was Yukinari himself. He had felled the erdgod and held off the Missionary Order the True Church of Harris when it had invaded the town under the guise of evangelism. And this evoked from the townspeople a feeling of devotion—almost of religious fervor. This came out in the way everyone but those closest to him referred to him as “honored erdgod,” despite the fact that Yukinari was not an erdgod in the strict sense.

He had, in effect, replaced the erdgod. As such, he was the new banner the priests could rally to, and thereby protect their status. They saw that they had to put themselves between Yukinari and the townspeople in order to assure their position.

“You think getting between me and the citizens will let you keep your power—right?” Open hostility entered Yukinari’s voice, but Luman nodded calmly.

“In broad terms, I suppose, yes.”

Yukinari squinted at Luman. Why had the priest insisted on having this conversation not in the sanctuary where he and the other priests lived, but in the adjoining orphanage? Most likely, he had wanted Yukinari to see Hannah and the other orphans before the talk began. It would make him that much more open to their pleas.

But wasn’t that, in essence, taking the children hostage? There was no weapon, but the threat was the same. If you don’t do what we want, these poor children will starve to death.

No doubt they had wanted Berta present for a similar reason. Yes, she was his “shrine maiden” now, and if she added her voice to their own, it would be that much easier to persuade him. And Luman, of course, knew Berta’s personality full well: she would never turn away from her little sisters at the orphanage.

Indeed, at that very moment Berta was nervously switching her gaze from one of them to the other, looking as if she might burst into tears. She may not have understood the nuances of the power they were negotiating for, but she at least grasped that Luman wanted something from Yukinari.

I guess I don’t lose anything by letting them play my representatives, Yukinari thought, picturing Hannah’s smiling face. Luman and the others weren’t asking anything exceptional of him. All he had to say was “Sure,” and they would once more be the god’s spokesmen.

“No, thanks,” Yukinari said. “I grant I’m the god of this town—but I’m not doing it for priests like you. I’m doing it to take responsibility for what I did, and to protect the people I need to protect. I couldn’t care less whether you guys get anything out of it or not.”

He remembered how the religion his mother had joined would always squeeze money out of her on one pretext or another. It served no purpose, didn't change anything; it only supported the people who made their living from being connected to the organization. It was no more and no less than that, and yet his mother had given gladly, and even seemed grateful for the very act of giving money to these people. She believed fervently that the amount she gave reflected her devotion, that she was somehow storing up virtue by these gifts.

And… Yukinari began thinking through things again. If I let these guys speak for me, yeah, they'd probably keep their power.

But it was hard to believe that donations to support the orphanage would continue now that sacrifices were no longer necessary. It was possible, of course, that with their safety and livelihoods guaranteed, Luman and the other priests would use their extra resources to take care of the orphans. But their willingness to use Hannah and her sisters as a bargaining chip suggested a high probability that the priests saw the girls as nothing more than a means to an end. Even if Yukinari went along with their request, it was unlikely to solve the real problem.

"Are you quite sure? Is there no way you will reconsider?" Luman cocked his head with just a hint of questioning. Or was it that he sensed the hesitation and conflict within Yukinari, saw that with one more push, he would give in...

"Forget it. I said no."

There was a silence from beside him. When Yukinari glanced over, he found Berta looking at the ground, trembling. She was caught between him and Luman now and had no idea what to do. Yukinari took her hand and stood, then turned once again to the priest. "I want to be clear. Like I told you: I'm not playing god to put food in your mouths."

"And most clear you are. A shame, my Lord. A terrible shame." His tone was detached. His calm did not seem shaken despite being so thoroughly rejected. It would only make things harder on Berta to stay there. Leaving Luman sitting in the room, Yukinari gave Berta's hand a firm tug and led her out.

●

No sooner had they returned to the "sanctuary" where they lived than Berta threw herself on the ground in front of Yukinari.

"My humblest apologies!"

"Whoa! What are you doing?!"

"Berta...?"

They hadn't even all made it inside; they were still at the entrance to their house. Yukinari and Dasa had walked in as normal, whereas Berta was now prostrate behind them, offering a stream of apologies. Apparently, she felt she wasn't fit to set foot inside the sanctuary until she had received Yukinari's forgiveness.

"Please… Forgive me..."

“Forgive you for what? Is this about the orphanage?” In his mind’s eye, Yukinari saw Hannah and the priest, Luman.

“Yes, my Lord!” Berta didn’t even pull her face out of the dirt as she answered.

“It wasn’t like that was your fault or anything. Now, get up. You know I hate this kind of thing.”

“But…” To Berta, it was entirely because of her that Yukinari was angry, and she wished desperately that he would spare Hannah and the priests any punishment.

“All right, look,” Yukinari said, crouching in front of Berta and taking her by the shoulders. He forced her to stand, sighing a little as he asked, “What exactly do you think I am?”

Did she take him for someone who would murder everyone who annoyed him a little bit? What was he, some kind of evil monster?

“You… You are my most revered god, Lord Yukinari.” Her eyes swam with tears as she looked at him.

“Yeah,” he said with a hint of exasperation, “that’s what I thought.”

Gods could dispense divine punishment on a whim. To Berta, it must have seemed obvious that Yukinari would lash out at Luman for his infuriating request. Unlike Yukinari’s previous world—unlike modern Japan—this world lacked any legal code or universally accepted social conventions. Even if such things had existed, they presumably wouldn’t have applied to gods, who transcended mere humans.

Here, souring the mood of a god was reason enough for a person to die. Anger a deity, and it would kill you: this was as unshakable a reality as the fact that things fell when you dropped them, or that standing in front of a light produced a shadow.

“Anyway, I’m not gonna kill those guys.” Yukinari took Berta by the hand and pulled her into the sanctuary. “And if it doesn’t bother me, it definitely shouldn’t bother you.”

“But, my Lord—”

“Don’t worry about it. Consider that a divine command.”

Yukinari wasn’t sure whether to be further annoyed that Berta accepted this almost immediately. “Y-Yes, sir. I won’t… I won’t worry about it.”

If only it were as easy as that. If words were all it took to change our feelings, there wouldn’t have been any problem. But if he left her to her own devices, Berta was likely to grow more and more depressed under a self-inflicted sense of guilt.

Yukinari seated Berta on the bench in the sanctuary, determined to listen once more to what she had to say. If kowtowing and apologizing would make her feel better, maybe he should let her. But…

“I believe what… what Master Luman said has… some merit to it,” she said.

“You think there’s merit in letting young girls be eaten in exchange for a god’s blessing?” Yukinari’s voice grew harsh before he knew what happened

—when he saw Berta flinch and cower, he quickly apologized. As she herself had said, be he kind or evil, Yukinari was the god she now worshipped. She had begged for his forgiveness simply because Luman and the priests had upset him. If she herself were to be the cause of his anger, there was no telling what she might do.

"I... I was raised in that orphanage," Berta said after she had calmed down. "Hannah, the other girls—they're like sisters to me, and the priests are like my father..."

To Berta, who had no family of her own, the priests and other orphans were as priceless as blood kin, even if her life had been the product of a system under which she would be a sacrifice.

"We have no parents. If we hadn't been chosen as shrine maidens, we would have just died in the streets or the wilderness somewhere..."

"I mean... Yeah, I guess you're right."

In his time here, Yukinari had already come to understand that Friedland was not a rich town. Certainly not rich enough for the townspeople to support an orphanage full of girls simply out of the goodness of their hearts. None of the villagers were in immediate danger of starvation, but neither did they have the spare resources to take care of anyone who didn't contribute. Poor nutrition meant illness was more likely, and recovery more difficult. In other words, there would be only a slow, wasting death in store.

"Now that we don't need shrine maidens, there won't be any donations... And without donations, the orphanage can't go on. Hannah and the others will end up on the streets..."

As the priests' authority declined, so had donations to the orphanage. Chances were, the first thing the priests would do as they tried to save themselves would be to cut the orphanage loose.

"For the time being, the girls are surviving on stored-up rations... But I don't think the orphanage will last for much longer..."

And then the children would have nowhere to go. Just as Berta, when she hadn't been sacrificed, had had nowhere to go.

"What you're saying is, you want me to take those priests up on their offer."

Berta said nothing further. She couldn't say it.

Yukinari looked back in the direction of Friedland and muttered, "Who knew being a god could be such a pain in the ass?"

●

Arlen Lansdowne was exhausted.

"Pathetic," he muttered. He had made this complaint so many times he had lost count. "How utterly... pathetic..."

It was not physical, but spiritual fatigue that afflicted him. Despite his fallen state, he was a member of the Civilizing Expedition of the Missionary Order. The training he had received in the year immediately after he joined the Order left his body relatively fit. The Order traveled by horse, but they

had to be capable of fighting in full plate mail, so they couldn't afford to be scrawny.

"...To think that I—even I—!"

What he felt now was altogether different from that wonderful tiredness that had followed each day of training in the capital. Fatigue of the body could be remedied with a night's sleep, but that of the spirit was much more difficult to escape; it was like being mired in clinging mud.

"I, a knight of the proud Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris!"

Now here he was on the frontier, in Friedland, constantly covered in dirt and grime, set to one menial task after another, used as carelessly as an old rag. And when the day was done, where did he go to sleep? A pitiful hovel of a "church."

Arlen and his men had ostensibly converted Friedland to the True Church and were now staying here in order to instruct the people—but the truth was that, though the knights wore no chains, they were treated like slaves. For Arlen, the son of nobility, this was such a dizzying decline in station as to drive him mad. The other knights felt much the same.

"Curse him... Damn that 'Blue Angel'!"

The missionaries had come all the way to Friedland to spread the true and proper teachings from the interior among the ignorant populace. This had been their mission, and it was glorious. So he believed, or had. But when they had finally arrived at the site of their mission, they were shocked to find their work disrupted by the "Blue Angel," who even destroyed their greatest tool, the statue of the guardian saint.

Then Fiona Schillings, once Arlen's classmate at the capital and now deputy mayor of Friedland, had blackmailed them, trapping them here. Even if they had been able to escape and get back to the capital, they would certainly be the scapegoats for the loss of the statue. At best, they would spend the rest of their lives as laughingstocks; at worst, they would be tried and found guilty.

"Just you... remember this. I swear... I swear, one day I will..."

Repeating those words like a curse, Arlen dragged his weary body back toward the shanty—no, the church. Five other knights, in various states of exhaustion, accompanied him.

"Excuse me—you there."

A voice spoke to them out of the night, and they stopped. The summons had come from a narrow alleyway between two buildings—from several priests of Friedland's native cult.

The knights raised their collective eyebrows, giving the priests a long, questioning look. The local religion was in direct competition with the True Church of Harris; they shared what amounted to a professional rivalry. So what did they want with Arlen and the others? And why were they taking such care to avoid being seen?

The man who appeared to be the oldest of the priests gave Arlen's group a reverent bow. He looked around, making sure there was no one else there, then took a step out of the alleyway. Finally, he spoke:

"We earnestly wish to speak to all you knights of the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris."

The six knights looked at each other silently. They had no idea what the priests could want. Did they seek revenge for how the missionaries had treated the people of Friedland like slaves when they first arrived? But there was no hint of anger or even derision on the priests' faces.

What, then?

The man who had been Arlen's superior was no longer there. He had supposedly been put to work somewhere else, and Arlen ranked highest among those who remained.

Arlen spent a moment in anguished reflection. Then he said, "We will hear what you have to say."

Whatever was going on, their treatment could hardly get any worse. Arlen guessed he had nothing to lose by accepting.

●

There was an exhalation in the dimness.

"Mn…"

Yukinari ran his finger over Dasa's tightly shut eyelid. Again and again. Carefully, gently, as if tickling the spot where her eyebrows started.

When Dasa got nervous, it became impossible to inspect her eyes—even if he forced her eyelid open, he would find the eye itself rolling wildly. Instead, he gently massaged the area around her eyes to warm them. After a while he could look at them up close, the blue of them filling his vision.

Her glasses were off to one side. Slowly, with great care, he lifted the eyelid of her right eye. Nothing stood between her eye and his. He looked carefully at it, but saw no clouding. No sign of inflammation. The eye seemed to have fully accepted the artificial lens he had produced and then inserted to treat her cataracts.

“Yu… ki…” Dasa fidgeted from the neck down. Yukinari held her head in his hands, so she couldn’t move it freely. She shifted her bottom several times, as if trying to find a comfortable way to sit.

“…This… is embarrassing…”

“What is?” He let go of the right eyelid, placing his thumb over the left instead. Again he began to rub it gently with the pad of his finger.

“My glasses…”

Her right hand reached out for where the spectacles lay beside her. Apparently, she found it awkward for someone to look directly into her eyes. That piece of transparent glass didn’t seem like much to Yukinari, but to Dasa it mattered.

Come to think of it, Hatsune didn’t like to be seen without her glasses, either…

If you were used to wearing glasses all the time, it made sense that you might find it embarrassing for someone to look directly into your naked eye, or even touch your eyelid or breathe on it. Having said that, this wasn’t the first time he’d inspected Dasa’s eyes like this. Yukinari found himself wishing she would just accept it.

“You know they have to be off. Just be patient.”

Their faces were so close they could feel each other’s breath. If Dasa put on her glasses, Yukinari’s breathing would fog them. They would only get in the way.

He pulled the left eyelid open with a certain amount of force. Another clear, blue eye stared back at him. No problems that he could see.

“You’re in good shape.” He took his hands off Dasa’s slightly crimson face. “No changes to speak of. Everything feel all right?”

“…Yes, I think. I’m fine.” She grabbed her glasses and put them on. She blinked twice, three times. It was enough to return her moist eyes to their usual, cool look. “But Yuki, you’re… not fine, are you?”

The question came very suddenly.

“Who, me?”

“The talk… with Berta this… afternoon,” she said, glancing at the wall.

On the other side of that wall was Berta’s room. She was already asleep in there—perhaps exhausted by everything that had happened since that morning.

“Are you… worried about her?”

Just as Yukinari was the only one who could read Dasa’s expressions, Dasa was capable of intuiting a great many things from Yukinari’s subtle looks and gestures. As the person who had known him longer than anyone in this world, it only made sense.

“I… You know how much I hate religion. Not any specific religion, just in general.”

“…I know.” Behind her glasses once again, Dasa’s blue eyes looked at the ground.

“My mom got sucked into religion, put all kinds of money into it. She tried to force me and my sister to join her. She even wanted my sister to be the founder’s lover—can you believe it? *It will be good for you, too*, she told her. *It’ll be wonderful. You were put on this earth to be his lover.* My own mother said shit like that with a straight face.”

He was, of course, talking about his previous world. But this wasn’t the only reason Yukinari detested religion.

“And then I came here… and the Church took Jirina from me.”

“…Yeah,” Dasa said with a small nod. As sisters, they had been very close. They didn’t look much like each other—but even if they hadn’t shared a blood connection, they were unmistakably family. But Jirina was killed as a traitor to the Church, and Yukinari had been torn away from his older sister by death when the two of them perished in a fire.

His older sister had been more important to him than anyone in the world. In that respect, he and Dasa were the same.

“I don’t care about anyone’s personal faith,” he said with the beginnings of a rueful smile. “Believe, don’t believe, it’s everyone’s choice. Lots of people seem to find real inner peace by believing in God. But when people try to force their beliefs on others—I despise that. And when it’s to get power, or money, or to control others? I can already feel the bile rising in my throat.”

“…Yeah.”

“That’s why I turned them down. Because of a little personal history. To think—” he gave a shrug and a sudden ironic smile. “—I’d do something like that, when *I’m* the one being worshipped as a god. The world can be a pretty twisted place sometimes, huh?”

“…Yuki…” Dasa reached out and touched his cheek.

“…Dasa?”

Touching the other person was Dasa’s way of making sure they were really there. She did it often, even in the middle of boring, everyday conversations. But this…

Wordlessly, she put a finger to his lips, as if to tell him there was no need to force a smile.

“If we can set up the waterworks, improve the farmland, they’ll need more workers. When the harvests get better—when Friedland is richer—then they might have the spare resources to take care of the orphans.”

But it wasn’t a simple question of amounts and numbers. People needed a certain level of comfort in their own lives before they could think about protecting the needy, helping them, caring for them. If they didn’t reach that level, the only alternative was to somehow force them to help. With religion, for example. Make such help for the needy something that was good by definition, because it would store up virtue—as the Buddhists believed with almsgiving.

In this place, Yukinari was a god. If he ordered it, people might help support the children at the orphanage, even if it impinged on their own lives. But he knew that wouldn't solve anything in the long run.

"I'll think of something eventually. But…"

"…It will take… time," Dasa said. And she was right. Yukinari might be taking the wisest path, but it would demand a great deal of time. And without an erdgod who could guarantee at least a decent harvest, the crops might fail the next year. That would mean starting over from less than zero. The process couldn't *not* take time.

"Yuki," Dasa said as if something had just occurred to her. "What if you use your… powers of physical reconstitution?"

"Yeah, I thought of that," Yukinari said with a frown. "But I don't think I could keep making grain, or anything edible, for very long."

Yukinari's powers were limited in several ways. He could only reconstitute a certain amount of material at once, and to do so he had to first reduce something else to dust, storing up the information inside it.

His abilities consumed information. For him to continually produce food, even if he himself could endure it, he would have to reduce the area around the village to a wasteland.

"It's a… question of efficiency," Dasa said. "What… if you were to produce something… valuable? Like a precious… metal?"

This must have seemed a perfectly obvious idea to Dasa, as an alchemist's apprentice. Yukinari himself was a sort of living alchemical device. He could produce gold or silver, if he wanted to. He could become a rich man overnight.

"A whole mountain of gold and silver wouldn't do Friedland much good right now."

Gold was used for currency because it was relatively durable and easy to produce. Put another way, it hadn't become prized for any dramatic, direct connection to human needs for clothing, food, or shelter. You couldn't eat it; it wouldn't slake your thirst. You certainly couldn't grow crops with it. All the gold in the world would do little for one of these remote provincial cities.

Dasa had grown up in a big city, in the capital. She had been shut away with her older sister, true, but material goods were plentiful, and she was familiar with the use of gold and silver as money. Unconsciously, she believed that money could buy close to anything.

"Those Church bastards have angels, too," he added, "but they aren't making precious metals left and right. It's because money is so closely connected to the social system—make a whole bunch of it, and you'll screw up more things than you realize."

If he put all his effort into making gold, for example, its value would plummet—it would no longer be rare enough to act as a representative currency. The economy would be thrown into chaos.

And more than anything else, using his powers that way would be as good as telling the Church that either an angel or a powerful alchemist was in the area. That would bring the missionaries down on them, in numbers vastly greater than Arlen had had with him. Yukinari was perfectly happy to fight them, as revenge for Jirina, but he also had to protect Dasa, and Friedland… It would be more than he could handle alone.

"From a broad perspective, markets and exchanges are a kind of network of information…"

Then he stopped, something pricking at the edges of his consciousness. Currency. Exchange. A broad perspective. The production and control of value. Take a step back, look at the big picture…

He and Dasa spoke at almost the same moment:

"Yuki. What about trade?"

"I get it! Trade is the answer!"

They looked at each other in surprise, their eyes wide.

"We don't have to limit this to Friedland—and we don't have to think exclusively in terms of the capital's trade routes."

Suddenly, he hugged Dasa with a smile.

"Y-Yuki…?"

"Dasa, you're brilliant! Thank you! Now we have something we can at least try!"

Her glasses slightly askew, Dasa made an uncharacteristic expression of confusion, her face a faint red. But whether this was happiness or unhappiness, Yukinari, embracing her, couldn't see.

"Was I… helpful…?" Dasa asked, moving her hand in a hesitant circle on Yukinari's back.

"Helpful? You were perfect! Thank you so much!"

Yukinari was an angel, and he was Friedland's god, but his spirit was still that of a human—indeed, a teenage boy. It was all too easy for him to become fixated on what was right in front of him, and forget to take a step back. He had been completely set on trying to make Friedland prosperous all by himself.

"We've still got the map we took with us when we ran away from the Church, right? That's a huge scale and not very detailed, but it should help us look for a trading partner."

"…Erm, Yuki."

"…Hm?"

"Let go of… No, don't, but please… take it easy…"

Yukinari realized that in his joy at this new idea, he had nearly crushed Dasa with his hug.

●

At the exact moment Yukinari was giving Dasa that joyous hug, Arlen and several of the other knights of the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris were in the building where the priests lived. Several of the missionaries had balked at the idea of meeting with representatives of the

local faith against which they were supposed to be fighting, but Arlen was more than ready to hear the priests out. He had had just about all he could take of being worked like a slave. He would do anything if it might change his situation.

The conversation had circled several times, the two parties sounding each other out with polite greetings and empty formalities. Finally, after a brief silence, one priest said:

"Let me come to the point. That erdgod—no, that *demon*, 'Yukinari.' We wish to help you destroy him."

This set the missionaries murmuring. Most of them probably couldn't believe what they were hearing. Arlen doubted the sanity of the man in front of him. Perhaps losing their power had driven these native cultists over the brink.

But the priests appeared to expect this reaction. They smiled as if this were just what they wanted. "We follow different teachings, but we are alike in that this 'Yukinari' has left us all in a most untenable position. Hence, we have resolved to end him."

Their logic was simple enough. Yukinari had felled the erdgod, meaning the priests, who relied on the deity for their position, had lost their authority. They meant to kill Yukinari in turn, making room for a new erdgod to come to Friedland. They might call Yukinari a demon in deference to the Harris Church, but what they meant was that he was in their way, and they intended to be rid of him.

"You're taking this too lightly!" Arlen exclaimed. "He's an actual angel! A monster! Even the statue of our guardian saint could not stand against him—what do you have that is more powerful than that?"

Arlen reviled Yukinari's very existence. As he toiled away at his chores each day, he spent his time repeating to himself that one day he would make Yukinari—the cause of it all—pay. But it was as much a way of getting himself through the day as it was a genuine resolution. He didn't really believe there was any way of defeating Yukinari.

"And that bastard is—"

He swallowed his words before he said something he shouldn't.

The Blue Angel. Yukinari had murdered the former Dominus Doctrinae. It had happened right in the capital, in the midst of thousands of missionary knights and tens of thousands of believers. And afterward, they hadn't even been able to catch him. He had escaped.

In a one-on-one battle, Yukinari was probably invincible. If they had a whole army of guardian statues, they might manage something—but the knights themselves, however well trained and armored, were still only human, and had no hope of defeating this enemy. They would die, and die instantly.

"Whatever the case, this is no laughing matter," Arlen shouted. "We refuse!" Two of the other knights were nodding, expressions of terror on their faces.

“Pathetic!” The voice of another man tore through the discussion, as if to overpower the quailing warriors. “And you call yourselves members of the Missionary Order of the glorious True Church of Harris?!” One of the other knights had risen from his chair, and was looking down at Arlen and the others.

“A-Arnold…?”

The man’s name was Clifton Arnold. His marks in training had put him below Arlen in the ranks of the Missionary Order—but the noble family he came from was just as prestigious as Arlen’s. Arlen held their respective ranks in the Order as reason enough to look down on Clifton, but the latter took this poorly, and they had clashed more than once.

Their superiors had quickly tired of this, and endeavored to keep Arlen and Clifton as far away from each other as possible, even when they were assigned to the same unit. Hence on their visit to Friedland, Arlen had been part of the group tasked with bringing down the erdgod, whereas Clifton had stayed in town to help with the edification of the villagers—that is, to help with putting collars around their necks.

This meant Clifton hadn’t seen it with his own eyes—hadn’t seen Yukinari casually annihilate the statue of the guardian saint, which was supposed to be the missionaries’ ultimate weapon. Clifton’s reflexive disgust for Arlen no doubt led him to believe that it was Arlen and his knights who had failed to properly utilize the statue. His viewpoint, in other words, was not so much that Yukinari was powerful as that Arlen was incompetent.

“This is an *angel* we’re dealing with!” Arlen said.

“And that has you cowering in your boots? An angel—*pfah*.” Clifton’s voice was even. “If it looks like a man, it will bleed like a man, and if you cut off its head it will die like a man.”

“If you think it’s as simple as that, why haven’t you done it yet?” Arlen felt as if he were about to vomit at Clifton’s sheer idiocy. This from a man who had never had a novel idea, never tried a bold move in his life, but only followed orders happily. No doubt he would paint his impetuousness as a willingness to seize opportunity. “We cannot win against *that*,” Arlen went on. “You are a fool, Clifton Arnold, an utter fool! There is nothing further we can do to resist that thing! You truly know nothing, you—”

“You are the fool, Arlen Lansdowne. Can you not see these men are attempting to offer us a way to do exactly what you say cannot be done?” Clifton snorted.

“Just so, sir,” the priest said, that knowing smile still on his face.

“If it helps us destroy that demon, I would join hands even with these native priests,” Clifton said. He looked each of the other missionaries in the face. “Is there no other man here who would do likewise?”

After a long moment, two of the others raised their hands. Neither of them had witnessed the destruction of the statue, either. In contrast, the remaining three knights, including Arlen, kept silent.

“I see a craven wind has blown through our ranks,” Clifton said, gazing down at Arlen and the others. “Let it carry you away from here. We will deal with that devil. You, Arlen Lansdowne, are a coward not worthy to be called a knight. Perhaps you should go to the barbarians and beg to be their manservant.” There was no hitch in Clifton’s voice, even though those very “barbarians,” the priests, sat directly across from him.

Arlen and the two other knights stood. “You will regret this.” They headed for the door, resolved to have nothing more to do with the matter. Clifton’s amused laughter followed them out of the room.

Chapter Two: Another Land’s God

“Run! Go! Don’t look back!”

Five men dashed as fast as they could through the gray morning light. Two of them wore priests’ vestments, the other three the armor of knights. Kicking up dirt, stumbling at times, they tried to keep to the last patches of night’s darkness.

“Ruuuun!”

The knights were armored, but there were so few of them. Traveling the roads between cities at night was immensely dangerous. The merchants who made the rounds on the frontier always traveled with at least twenty fully armed guards, and even then they moved only during daylight. When night travel was unavoidable, the entire company carried torches, sang songs, and played musical instruments in hopes of scaring off any wild animals.

All this was simple common sense to those who lived in these remote regions. And yet these men seemed to be doing exactly the opposite. They had been on horseback at first, but with no fire, breathing as quietly as they could. And they hadn’t taken one of the main roads, but a branch path some distance away. They wanted no one to see when they left town, no one to guess where they might be going.

But they paid a steep price for their audacious refusal to heed accepted practice. They had been ten when they set out—three priests, and seven knights to guard them. They had ridden on seven horses the knights brought. The priests, having no experience in horsemanship, rode with the three physically smallest knights.

But between the setting of the sun and its rising, their number had been cut in half. Less than half, including the horses. The animals had all met their ends early, leaving the men no choice but to flee on foot. Leave the horses behind. Leave comrades who still had breath in their lungs. It was the only alternative to letting the entire party be devoured.

“Hrgh…!” One of the knights suddenly stopped running. He turned around, back the way they’d come. Perhaps he’d foreseen that he would eventually be eaten when he fell, exhausted, and he’d decided that it was better to die with his sword in his hand, to strike even a single blow… But behind him, there was no sign of the bizarre creature they had been sure was chasing them.

“Wh-Where are you?!” the knight demanded, bloodshot eyes darting right, then left. “Come out and face me! Xenobeast?! You’re just an overgrown animal! One good slice and you’ll—eeeyaarrrgh!”

It came from above him: a shadow from a tree branch over his head grabbed him like a hawk swooping on a mouse. Sharp claws seemed to dig into his throat. Then the shadow gave a half-twist, using its downward momentum to tear off the man’s head.

The headless corpse collapsed to the ground with a geyser of blood. Beside it, a grotesque creature, something like a mountain dog with exceptionally long limbs, took the man's head, his face still frozen in an expression of horror, and slammed it against the ground.

Once, twice, three times... With the fourth blow, the back of the head split open and the skull shattered, its contents dribbling out. A long tongue unrolled from the creature's jaws and began gently lapping up the brains.

A xenobeast. That was what these things were called. The word didn't refer to a specific species or organism. *Xeno-*: strange, other. An animal that was no longer an animal. Many were violent, indeed evil, and loved to eat humans, especially their brains. Xenobeasts understood that that was where intelligence and spiritual power resided, and that the more of it they consumed, the sooner they themselves would grow in spiritual ability.

Therefore, a xenobeast who spotted a human could be expected to attack. Not out of hunger, but to become more intelligent. It wasn't the motivation of an average beast.

"Benjamin..." one of the knights moaned, speaking the name of the man whose head had just been torn off.

"Look what we've been reduced to already...!" another knight, Clifton Arnold, said ruefully.

"We cannot give up yet."

"Milord Bartok?"

"Do we not say that a knight's greatest honor is at the vanguard and at the rear guard? To protect others is our duty! Go, Arnold, look after the priests!" Then the knight called Bartok stood and drew his sword.

His words might have been more convincing if he had spoken them at the beginning, before they had left their comrades to die. But no one at that scene was likely to point this out. Freakishly formed animals loomed to the left and right of the roadway.

Three of them in total. There was no hope of beating them. Even a single such monster would overwhelm a normal human, let alone three that had already eaten several knights and priests. It would make them that much more intelligent, that much more of a threat. The spiritual power a xenobeast gained by eating a person made it all the tougher.

"Milord Bartok—I wish you success in battle!"

Once he was sure Clifton and the priests were running again, the knight Bartok readied his sword. He would buy them time. Perhaps he could even take one of the monsters with him. Xenobeasts had flesh like other living beings. If you cut them, they would be wounded; stab them in the right place and they could be killed. But...

What?

Bartok furrowed his brow. The beasts weren't attacking. In fact, one of them seemed to be slowly backing away. Could the overwhelming force of Bartok's resolution have intimidated them?

Hardly... What... is going on...?

Bartok was forty-five years old, well past his prime as a knight. Practically an old man in the ranks. But that meant he had a great deal more experience of battle than youngbloods like Clifton Arnold. It had given him some ability to sense what was going on in situations like this.

But now, that sense was confused. There were three xenobeasts in front of him; that much was obvious. But what was this feeling that seemed to come so keenly from all around? Had he been surrounded by a pack of xenobeasts, or wild animals, without realizing it? But what he sensed now was… different from the aura of the creatures in front of him. It lacked a certain—reeking quality. Bartok didn't have the words to express it. It was an aura, and yet not an aura, lying gently over everything around.

It's almost like… being in the stomach of some… giant creature…

No sooner had he thought this than he gave a start as part of the aura began to cohere. Bartok, who had been standing anxiously at the ready, took an almost unconscious swing with his sword. He didn't aim at the xenobeast in front of him, but swiped directly at where he'd felt the aura come together.

But nothing met his blade. Had he imagined it? No…

"What is this…?"

As he pulled his sword back, a thread came with it. On closer inspection, it was a vine.

What was going on here? Perhaps he had simply caught his sword on the plant.

Suddenly, he realized the scream he heard was coming from the xenobeast. Bartok looked forward again, and saw the creature entangled in vines, the same as the one that had been on his sword. He saw now that *entangled* was too kind a word for what was happening. The vines bit deep into the creature's flesh, and he could hear the sharp crack of breaking bones.

"Milord Bartok!" The voice belonged to Clifton. He should have been gone by now. Bartok looked back to find the young missionary running up to him.

"Arnold! What happened to the priests?"

"They're over there." Bartok looked where Clifton indicated, and indeed, the two surviving priests were standing there. Their faces were obscured by the distance, but they seemed quite shocked. Clifton wore the same expression, one of astonishment mingled with horror.

And finally…

There was a sound of something breaking, and all three of the xenobeasts slumped over, their strength gone. A broken bone must have finally pierced some critical organ. Blood bubbled out of their mouths. And then the "absorption" began.

"They're… They're…" Clifton muttered, trembling, as if delirious.

And it was no wonder. Even Bartok had never seen such a disturbing sight. The vines and ivies moved like snakes, like earthworms, slowly

digging into the bodies of the xenobeasts. Into their mouths, their ears, their noses. Then into their still-open eyes, pushing past their eyeballs. It almost seemed a kind of violation of the animals by the plants.

What was more, the creatures' corpses withered before the knights' eyes. Even the blood stopped frothing at their mouths, and they became desiccated, as though they had died of starvation. It was all being absorbed —the blood, the bodily fluids.

"We must... We must be dreaming," Bartok groaned.

Finally, when the corpses had been sucked dry, reduced to less than half their original size, they were carried off somewhere, without a sound. The vines seemed to simply lift them away.

But something looked to be taking their place. Something emerging slowly from the depths of the darkness between the trees.

"Wh-Who are you?!"

She appeared to be a young girl. Her age, perhaps ten years. A face still innocent with youth. She looked sweet; if Bartok had seen her on the streets of town, it would have been hard not to smile at her.

But now he, Clifton, and the priests could only watch her with faces stiff with fear. Each of them knew that she was more than just a little girl.

She wore a white robe such as none of them had ever seen before; it was not an ordinary outfit, nor clothing for farm work. The hem was long, as were the sleeves, and it wasn't pulled tight anywhere, but hung loosely on her. Even more striking were the vermillion cords woven along the edges, as if for decoration. The robe had nothing in the way of buttons. It was very strange, but also, somehow, very beautiful.

Then there were the four "horns" growing out of the girl's head. Two smaller horns budded on each side of her forehead, and just behind them, almost past her ears, grew two larger horns, twisted into branches like a stag's antlers. It was possible they were simply ornaments made to look like horns, of course, but the hair they sank into was clearly not that of a human. It was the vivid green of fresh grass.

"Who are you? *What* are you?!" Bartok demanded. The girl blinked and looked at him as if she had only just realized he was there.

In a tranquil tone, she replied with her own question: "What manner of creature are you?" As she spoke, she pointed at Bartok with the stick she held in her right hand. It, too, was unique. Leaves grew at the tip, as though it had just been broken off some tree. But each of the leaves was a different color, a whole rainbow of them, and on the other end was a ring of gold.

"What do you mean in coming to my realm?" As she asked this second question, the girl began to approach them with steps that gave no sense of any weight.

Bartok and the others could say nothing, but only watch her with abject astonishment. As she walked, something bright appeared in her footprints. Flowers. Flowers of every hue, and already in bloom. They hadn't existed the instant before, yet now they grew as naturally as if they had always

been there. They sprouted behind her, a parade of flowers that blossomed with every step she took.

What in the world could be happening?

I—I hesitate to believe it, Bartok thought, but could this be...?

One of the priests kneeled and spoke: “W-We are men with cause to travel in haste through this land. Might you—even your honored self—be the erdgod of this place?”

Wordlessly, the girl turned to look at the priest, her green hair billowing gently. Such a simple gesture, and yet she almost seemed to be dancing.

“My name is called Yggdra.” Her tone was solemn. “And the name of my familiar who stands before you, Ulrike.”

“An erdgod… with a *name*…?” Clifton breathed, amazed.

Erdgods and demigods rarely had names. Or at least, they rarely introduced themselves. While there might be one creature that served as its “core,” the erdgod itself was a conglomeration of xenobeasts and wild animals who had imbibed its divinity, meaning its concept of an “individual” was vastly different from that of any human. Or so it was said. Some erdgods did have names, but these were often invented by the humans who worshipped them, for convenience.

And here, not only the god itself, but…

“A familiar with a name, too?”

“We are many, and one. One, and many. Our messenger Ulrike is one of our progenitors and among our oldest familiars.”

Bartok and Clifton looked at each other, struck dumb. They did not entirely understand what she was saying, but…

“This is…”

The erdgod of the next town, the one Bartok and his companions had risked the dangers of the night to meet. They had heard only vague rumors, and even the priests hadn’t known what this deity looked like. But now, here it was before them.

●

In the biggest room in Yukinari’s “sanctuary,” on the floor.

The sheepskin map was spread open, Yukinari and the others sitting on the floor around it. They didn’t use chairs or a desk for the same reason they hadn’t at the Schillings mansion—they simply didn’t have a table big enough to hold the map.

“So we’re looking for somewhere close, ideally a one or two-day round trip, with relatively stable harvests.” Yukinari looked up from the map at Fiona, who was sitting directly across from him. “And if they have a large economy, that would be good, too. I know it’s a lot to hope for, but is there anywhere around here like that, Fiona?”

“Hmm…” Fiona furrowed her brow and looked at the map.

Incidentally, Yukinari had come into possession of the map when he stole it upon fleeing the Church in the capital. He had taken it so as to have some sense of where to go, rather than running blindly. It seemed to have originally been used to determine tax levies, and it depicted quite a large part of the kingdom, with the capital at the center. It was likely that few other maps showing such a large area existed. The one real problem with it was that unrolling the entire thing took a great deal of space.

“I think the most prosperous town around here would be… Rostruch, probably.” Fiona leaned over toward what, from Yukinari’s perspective, was the right side of the map, near where Friedland was positioned.

“Probably?” Fiona’s answer had included an uncharacteristic note of uncertainty.

At the moment, Yukinari and the others were trying to find a partner for trade. Obviously, any trade that utilized the main roads required the permission of the capital, but this was a sort of covert commerce, without too much emphasis on the *covert*. They wanted somewhere close by, somewhere they could trade with and not be noticed by the capital; ideally, somewhere richer in crops and livestock than Friedland was.

“You have to cross a mountain range to get there. If you go by horse along the main road, I hear it only takes half a day, but if you’re going to walk, I’d assume two days at least.” Fiona ran her finger horizontally along the map until she stopped at a certain point. “Rostruch is supposed to be right around here. The shortest route is through these mountains, but it’s a dangerous trip, so apparently most people go around, like th—”

“Fiona?” Yukinari cut her off. “I’m hearing an awful lot of ‘supposed to’ and ‘apparently.’ It sounds like hearsay.”

“That’s because it is.” Fiona shrugged. “Almost no one—in fact, no one at all—from Friedland has ever been to Rostruch, or vice versa. The town hardly does any trade. Apparently, it’s surrounded by plains, but those plains are surrounded by mountains, and there’s a swamp on the way, too. It’s supposed to be an awful lot of trouble to get there. To tell the truth, I didn’t even know it existed until I went to the capital.”

“So you’re saying it doesn’t really have relations with the surrounding areas. Maybe they’re isolationists, or like to keep to themselves. I mean, maybe Rostruch just doesn’t want to trade with anyone else?”

“I’ve never heard anyone say anything like that…”

At least, the merchants that periodically visited Friedland seemed to stop by Rostruch, too. It seemed a richer place for business than Friedland, although the merchants apparently visited only once in every several journeys.

The area of Rostruch seemed to produce quite enough for itself, and might never have had to seriously contemplate trade with the rest of the world. That meant, of course, that it wouldn’t get word of cultural or technological developments, but insofar as they had no word from the outside world, the people there wouldn’t know what they were missing.

“It’s no island, but it’s a lot like Japan when it cut itself off from the world in the seventeenth century…”

Fiona was quick to notice the unfamiliar word. “Ja…pan…? Is that the name of a town somewhere?”

“Yeah, sort of.” Trying to explain that it was in another world would only invite trouble, so Yukinari left it at that. Instead, he went back to the business at hand: “Okay, for starters we want to work on establishing

regular trade relations with this Rostruch place. If it goes well, it might even lead to new opportunities. Maybe we should go out and see the place ourselves. I wonder what we can bring from Friedland that they'd like..."

It was a question of value. The same object might be worth different amounts in different places. The best-case scenario was that Friedland would have something considered unusual in Rostruch. But if not, Yukinari could always use his powers as an "angel" to make something. It was certainly more efficient than just producing a food supply.

But then Fiona spoke up, a shocked look on her face. "Yukinari? You can't possibly mean to go yourself?"

"Well, yeah, that's what I was thinking..." He could send a representative, but it would be so much quicker to do it himself.

"Rostruch—I've heard that area has its own erdgod. I don't know the specifics, but he's supposed to be pretty powerful. If you, another god, show up there, what do you think's going to happen?"

"What do you mean? You think he would just assume I was an enemy and attack me?"

"A new erdgod—usually a former demigod—takes over when the old one is killed." An erdgod, spiritually bound to the land, was typically immortal. Left alone, its sense of self would gradually weaken, until it became part of the very earth—essentially a natural phenomenon. But in any event, it wouldn't grow old and die the way mortal creatures did. That was why demigods who sought divine status frequently attacked existing erdgods.

"But I'm not a demigod," Yukinari said. The Friedlanders called him a god for convenience, but he was something different from either the demigods or the erdgods of this world.

"But demigods do come after you just like any other erdgod, right?" Fiona said.

"Well... true." Yukinari frowned as he remembered the birdlike creature from earlier. "I wonder what makes them think of me that way."

"Probably... the strength of your... spiritual power." It was Dasa who now entered the conversation. "Yours is... great enough to be called... a god, Yuki."

"Spiritual power, huh? Gotta admit, I've never really understood that."

Yukinari's powers of physical reconstitution, as well as the erdgods' ability to control the environment, were supposed to be products of this spiritual power. It was also what was supposed to be stored up in the holy oil that made the Harris Church's guardian saint statue move. But Yukinari had never directly perceived this power with his own senses. Heat and electricity, for example, were things a person could sense and understand, but spiritual power was not. That was why being told that he had great spiritual power didn't quite sit right with him.

"Anyway... We'll figure out some way to throw them off about that." For that matter, Yukinari could probably just fell the other erdgod. But to do so would be to eliminate the power of that same god, the power that supported

Rostruch. The town would decline into poverty; in a word, it would run directly counter to his goals.

Even in Friedland, the erdgod hadn't had much to do with people's daily lives. It would appear just once every several years for the ritual of the sacrifice, and otherwise wouldn't be seen. Apparently, this sort of behavior was quite common. Yukinari was assuming there was a possibility they could conduct trade without ever encountering the local deity.

"But Yukinari." Fiona narrowed her eyes and glanced at Berta. The other girl had been staring into space for some time now, perhaps unable to follow the conversation. "Most erdgods want sacrifices. You killed ours when you happened across the sacrificial ritual, right?"

It was true that Yukinari had killed Friedland's erdgod in an attempt to rescue Berta, who was supposed to be sacrificed to it.

"Well… We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. *If* we come to it." Yukinari sighed. "It won't help us to sit here imagining all the bad things that could happen. We have to go and try to get a feel for the area—and for Rostruch. I'll try my best not to be noticed by the erdgod."

"…All right." Fiona gave a sigh of her own, perhaps realizing there was no way to stop Yukinari from going. She backed off.

"For this first trip, just Dasa and I will go. Fiona, I want you to focus on the work here in town. Berta, help her however you can. And… Well, what could be a better chance for some ambitious demigod than while I'm away? If some upwardly mobile pseudo-deity does show up, just leave him alone and try not to antagonize him."

It was said that forming the spiritual bond with the land that was necessary for a demigod to become an erdgod took several days in which they were not interrupted.

"Just for safety's sake, I'll make three Durandalls and leave them here. If anything comes up, you can use them."

With a gun, it wasn't impossible for a human to kill a demigod or even an erdgod. Sharpshooting practice was necessary, of course, but a demigod large enough to challenge for the position of erdgod would be no fool. If the humans were armed with powerful weapons, it would be smart enough to think twice before attacking them. From that perspective, firearms with their great explosions were a nice, easy form of intimidation.

"Okay," Fiona said. "And I'll write you a letter of introduction to the mayor of Rostruch. I don't know how much help it'll be, but I don't think it could hurt."

"That'd be great." Yukinari nodded, starting to roll up the map. Dasa helped him.

"It's been… a while since it was just the… two of us," she whispered.

"Did you say something?" he asked, not quite catching the words.

For a second, Dasa pursed her lips as if she were going to pout. But then she said, "Nothing," and shook her head.

●

The Great Cathedral overflowed with people of every type: old and young, men and women. Passion rippled through the air from the solemn sound of a pipe organ and the swelling harmonies of the believers' hymns. The place was packed with more people than it had been built to hold. They were crammed in, in the hopes that everyone who wanted to attend could do so.

But they were not only there because they desired to worship. There was also the expectation on the part of those holding the service that all the hot air the believers expelled would begin to dull their senses.

Humans are group creatures. Put them in a small space together, and they begin to lose their individuality. It becomes easier to just go along, and to be roped into the opinions of those one is sharing the space with.

The prayers from the lips of all the people swirled through the Cathedral, on and on.

"Mm."

From the second-floor terrace, someone looked down over all this and made a satisfied sound. It was a man just entering old age. He had narrow features and looked like the fastidious type. He wore white vestments over his slender frame, and on top of those, a cape embroidered to show his rank. It showed that he stood at the apex of this Cathedral—indeed, of the whole Harris Church.

Justin Chambers. Current Dominus Doctrinae of the True Church of Harris and the man who had single-handedly planned the conversion of the remote regions during his time as Cardinal. He had earned great acclaim for spreading the church's teachings all the way to the frontier in a single swoop, and after the previous Dominus died, Chambers defeated a number of challengers to emerge as the new leader.

At the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, he was regarded as harboring unparalleled ambition, and some even suggested that in spite of his studious exterior, he was in favor of armed violence. It was true that many of the plans he had advanced, including expanding the Civilizing Expedition and ensuring that all of the brigades of the Missionary Order were fully armed and outfitted, to say nothing of the Inquisition, had more than a whiff of blood about them.

"That's right. Pray. Prayer is strength." Casting his eyes over all the fervently supplicating faithful, Justin smiled in a way that could almost have been called gentle. "And strength gives rise to miracles." There was no one else on the terrace to hear him speak. Justin turned on his heel and began the long, long walk down the corridor alone.

This place was attached to the Great Cathedral, but regular believers were not allowed inside. A great many facts that the unwashed masses had no need to know were hidden here. Even priests below a certain rank were not permitted to enter. And there...

"Your Holiness, Dominus Doctrinae."

A young woman was suddenly alongside Justin as he walked slowly down the hall. She was perhaps a little over twenty years old. Her long red hair was tied and draped over her left shoulder. Her clothes were mostly black, but revealed a great deal of her chest, giving her the air of a street worker. She seemed entirely out of place. On one hand she wore a white glove that reached to her elbow, and on the back was some kind of circle, along with some letters and a complicated design.

Her sharp features were heavily made up, making her appear glamorous—even bewitching. And yet a certain gloom could be detected in the woman's expression.

"Jaroslava..." Justin spared a glance for the woman beside him.

Jaroslava Vernak. That was her name, but few spoke it. She was someone who was not supposed to exist within the Church, and many priests and acolytes, should they spot her, would act as if there were no one there. Everyone in the upper levels of the Church knew that if they attracted the attention of the Dominus Doctrinae by speaking out, they could lose not only their positions, but even their lives.

So they would say nothing. Not even if an alchemist, who embraced heresy, walked openly in the Church. Even if she was, for all intents and purposes, His Holiness's lover.

"The result?"

"Perfect. As usual."

An alchemist and the head of the Harris Church, talking as they walked down the hall. The ignorant average believer would no doubt have goggled to see it.

"And the device to circulate holy oil? No irregularities?"

"None whatsoever."

"Excellent. Keep bringing me news like this."

They began to descend a long staircase at the end of the hall. They went past the ground floor, then lower, into a basement. At the end of the stairs, the path was blocked by a thick iron door. It could only be opened by entering thirteen numbers, numbers only Justin and Jaroslava now knew. One other man had known them, but he was dead—Justin's predecessor.

Wordlessly, they unlocked the door and pushed it open.

A bizarre scene greeted them. Those without the proper knowledge and education would no doubt have been at a complete loss to say what the place was for. Even those who knew something about the world might simply have taken it for a massive alcohol distillery.

Dozens of pipes crawled across the walls. They connected machines studded with more metal tubes. Valve levers and oversized pumps were conspicuous, along with a gigantic cylindrical filter.

"How is our honored 'founder'?"

"No concerns, of course. With my abilities, there will never be any problems with that thing." Jaroslava smiled.

"Please don't refer to him as 'that thing.' What would you do if he heard you?" Justin narrowed his eyes. "That is no ordinary angel. He is our venerated founder."

"...Yes. Certainly. My mistake."

The two of them walked past the forest of pipes and tubes to stand before a massive glass cylinder positioned deep in the room. All of the tubes crossed ceiling and walls and floor to reach it.

A person floated inside. The cylinder was full of red holy oil, so it was impossible to make out the details of the figure within. But it was clearly a small person—a man, to judge by the features that could be glimpsed through the liquid. But it was impossible to say any more.

Justin gazed at the person floating in the blood-red stuff. "You have my thanks, Jaroslava. The former Dominus and all those close to him died so suddenly... There were rumors of the 'founder,' but not a single written reference. I could never have handled his sacred coffin with my knowledge and skills alone. And of course, I could hardly conduct an open search through the Church and beyond hoping to find someone with the right qualifications."

"Of course. Absolutely." She gave a modest smile.

"Can you imagine what would happen if I made public, or even thought of making public, that the source of all our miracles, the source of the power of the True Church of Harris, was this homunculus? An artificial life whose origins no one knows? The first time I saw him, even I was shocked."

Jaroslava licked her lips alluringly. "There was a great deal to be learned about alchemy from examining this coffin and your 'founder.' Truly incredible. I'm the one who should be thanking you."

Justin looked from the floating figure to Jaroslava. "And someday I'll let you. I have high expectations of you—make sure you see to the sacred coffin."

"Yes... As you command, Your Holiness." Jaroslava bowed her head reverently, first to Justin, and then to the person floating in the glass tank.

●

They'd left Friedland half a day before. Yukinari and Dasa wanted to escape the confusing mountain byways and reached the area around Rostruch as soon as possible.

"Look at you go," Yukinari said, patting the vehicle that rumbled under him. It was an iron horse—the closest word in Yukinari's vocabulary would probably be *motorcycle*. There were actually two wheels in both front and

back, to help with stability, so in that sense it might have more correctly been called a buggy. But the sleek construction gave it the profile of a motorcycle.

Yukinari named it Sleipnir, after the divine horse of Norse legend. The overall construction was rather rough, just a machine with four wheels, so perhaps it was the awesome name that accounted for how it had brought Yukinari and Dasa so far and with such power in just half a day. There was just one hitch.

“I feel… sick…” Dasa groaned from behind, where she was keeping a tight hold on Yukinari.

“Yeah, sorry,” Yukinari said, bringing Sleipnir to a stop. “That off-road excursion was a bit sudden. I should have put a little more thought into the suspension.”

Yukinari climbed off, then offered Dasa his hand so she could get down. He seated her on the root of a nearby tree and began running his hand over her back. Dasa never had very strong color, but now she looked even more pale than usual. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she had vomited right then and there.

“I’ll be a little more careful next time.”

“Next time…?” Dasa slumped over as if Yukinari had sentenced her to death.

Sleipnir was built of parts salvaged from the statue of the guardian saint, the alleged ultimate weapon the Harris Church missionaries had brought with them. Yukinari just stuck some wheels on. The statue in question was essentially a giant robot for use in battle, but any machine as complicated as that required an engine to move. Yukinari had suspected there might also be a motor inside—or perhaps several—and an investigation of the statue, which lay abandoned near town, had proven him correct.

Hence, Yukinari had taken two rear wheels and the salvaged pieces, holding them together with a chain he made himself, along with brakes and handlebars—the minimum necessary equipment. For fuel, if it could be called that, he of course used the same holy oil that had powered the statue.

Holy oil was a liquid that could be induced to expand or contract via the vibrations from a tuning fork. An engine that used holy oil required that occasional stimulus be applied with a tuning fork in order to keep running, but unlike the engines Yukinari was used to, it didn’t produce any sounds of combustion. The sensation was almost like running an electric motorbike.

By the way, he had modeled the brakes and handlebars on the bicycle he had ridden in his previous world, so they didn’t quite fit the appearance of a motor vehicle. Their overall function—the niceties of control and turning radius, for example—might leave something to be desired. The less-than-perfect suspension was what prompted Dasa’s car sickness. She had never been much of a complainer, so she hadn’t said anything for quite a while—but Yukinari had noticed much earlier that she’d seemed out of sorts.

In spite of all this, they were happy enough to have nearly halved their transit time.

“Still,” Yukinari said, “no attacks by any demigods or xenobeasts. I’d say it’s been a pretty easy trip overall…”

Dasa shot him a venomous look over the top of her glasses, which had slid down her nose.

“…or not. Sorry.” Yukinari sat down next to Dasa and started rubbing her back again. But Dasa gave a nauseated groan, holding her arms to her chest.

“Does it hurt? What do you want to do? Should I loosen your collar?”

“Yes… please,” she said.

With her blessing, Yukinari reached for the collar of Dasa’s shirt. Her clothes were covered with leather, and could be tightened down more than they first appeared. Even just loosening her neckline should make things considerably easier on her.

“……Mn.” Dasa gave a short grunt. The way she had contorted her body with her nausea made her clothing look somehow ill-fitting—no, rumpled—now that the collar was loose. Her collarbone and the pale skin of her neck were visible, and Yukinari couldn’t quite shake a sense of guilt, as if he were doing something wrong.

“Oh…” Keeping his eyes pointedly on the horizon, Yukinari resumed running his hand over Dasa’s back. For a while she simply sat there, but then, silently, she snuggled up against his arm and leaned into his chest.

“Dasa…?”

“Let me… stay like this for a… while,” she whispered, her head on his shoulder. “…May I?”

“Uh, I mean, sure…” Yukinari scratched his cheek with a finger of his left hand.

“…It’s been a while…”

“Huh? What has?”

“Since… it was just the two of us, Yuki. Since… we did this.” He couldn’t see her face, but he had the sudden sense that Dasa was smiling.

“Oh…”

When they had been traveling together, they had often had to camp out. They had slept next to each other like this many nights in order to keep Dasa warm, so she wouldn’t catch cold. They hadn’t slept in each other’s arms since they took up residence in Friedland. However hastily their hut may have been built, it still had four walls and a roof, and they could cover themselves with blankets while they slept.

But… I don’t know…

Before, when they had squeezed together this way, he hadn’t given it much thought. It was just to keep Dasa warm; there was nothing else to it. But now he found himself strangely agitated; his pulse had quickened. And it seemed to be the same with Dasa. He could feel her heartbeat against his own chest, despite the intervening layers of bone and muscle. The sensation

of her pulse made his own increase, which only caused Dasa's heart to beat faster in turn. From her, to him, and back, as if their heartbeats were urging each other on, or as if they were connected on some profound level. It was a strange sensation.

My body is artificial, Yukinari thought, but in situations like this it acts just like a real one...

Or perhaps his heightened senses made it that much easier to influence and be influenced by other people's bodies.

"...Yuki." Dasa spoke suddenly, as though she had just thought of something.

"What's up? Still feeling ill?"

"I'm... happy. Really happy."

Maybe this could be attributed to Dasa's particular desire to touch other people in order to confirm their existence. Or perhaps it was another feeling altogether. Yukinari couldn't decide, but he said, "Oh yeah...?"

He was strangely embarrassed. He couldn't quite figure out where to look, as though he were trying to avoid something.

That was when he noticed it, far off on the horizon.

"Is that it...?"

In the distance, he could see what appeared to be the walls of a town. Given how far away it was, they must have been awfully big. Yukinari narrowed his eyes with a questioning look. It wasn't so much a wall as a fence. The top wasn't even; instead, something like pillars poked up at intervals. But each of the pillars was remarkably large.

Almost as if the barrier were made of trees, giant trees well over a hundred years old.

"Yuki...?" Dasa pulled her head off his chest and gave him a quizzical look. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing... I can see something that might be Rostruch."

Dasa followed Yukinari's gaze, not saying anything.

"What do you want to do? Want to rest here a bit longer? Or should we get to town and then take a break?"

"...Mn." Dasa tightened her collar again. "I'm fine now."

"Don't overstress yourself, okay?"

On this trip, a matter of minutes would make no difference. It would be perfectly reasonable to rest until she was feeling completely restored. But Dasa said, "It's... all right. I'll manage," and then mounted Sleipnir again.

Yukinari climbed down in front of her, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding tight to his back.

"I don't want to be... a burden, Yuki," she said.

"What're you talking—" he began, but then stopped. Instead he said, "Thanks."

He could feel the warmth of her against his back. And with that word of gratitude, he brought Sleipnir to life once more.

●

By all accounts, Rostruch was something of an island, with minimal contact with the outside world. So Yukinari's biggest concern in going there, especially so suddenly, was whether they would even let him in when he arrived. He had Fiona's letter of introduction, but there was a perfectly good chance they wouldn't recognize her name, although they might know of Friedland itself.

Well, the first step was a good offense. Yukinari arrived at the gate into Rostruch. But...

"Look at this thing..." He stared openmouthed at the wall—no, the fence—that stretched out from either side of the gate.

It was a forest.

A row of trees, dozens if not hundreds of years old to judge by the size, were lined up at incredibly even intervals. Countless branches spread out left and right; it was clearly impossible to slip in between the trees. Where the roots were exposed, it was obvious just how tangled together they were; there was hardly any space between them.

What in the world was this? Even a master gardener, bent on creating a wall of trees for his city, couldn't have done this.

The gate at least was man-made, built of logs. And at that moment, it was opening outward. Apparently, the inhabitants of Rostruch were aware of Yukinari and Dasa's arrival, but it wasn't immediately clear how. Yukinari was just mulling it over when—

"...Yuki." Dasa called out; she had noticed something.

He looked where she was pointing and saw a strange line stretching out. It was a parade of people—men and women, old and young, wearing clothing of all sorts—and each of them held something that looked like a tree branch with leaves at the end. They were walking around, waving the branches from side to side in a set pattern. It almost looked like some sort of religious observance.

"What's that? A ritual?"

"...Probably." There was a shadow of doubt in Dasa's reply. A new area meant a new erdgod. It wouldn't be surprising if devotion to the deity took a different form here than it did in Friedland.

"Erdgod here's a bit of a glutton, huh?" Yukinari narrowed his eyes, watching the procession as it came out through the gate and passed right in front of them. The people proceeded silently as they pulled a large shrine float along with them. The people riding on it were presumably the offerings to the erdgod. In other words, the sacrifices. He couldn't shake the sense that there were... well, a lot of them.

From what he and Dasa could see from where they stood, there were at least five people on the float. All of them appeared to be asleep, face up. There might even have been more people in the shadows. In Friedland, there had only been one sacrifice every several years, a single young woman. But here...

“The elderly…?” Dasa muttered. Most of the sleeping people had white hair. Four of the five that Yukinari could see were aged; the other appeared to be a young boy.

“How do they decide?” He and Dasa watched the procession pass by, with scant notion of what was going on. Then one of the people in the parade seemed to notice them. He stopped waving his branch and came over.

“Who are you two?” The speaker was a youth of about twenty years. “You’re not from Rostruch.”

“…That’s right.” Yukinari nodded, watching the man’s reaction closely. “I’m sorry to just show up like this. We’re from the town of Friedland, and we’ve come to Rostruch on business.”

The young man looked suspicious for a moment, but soon smiled. “Friedland… Ah, Friedland!” he said with a nod. “I’ve heard that name. Friedland. My apologies, we don’t hear much from the outside world.” Perhaps he offered the apology because he hadn’t recognized the town’s name immediately.

In a place that made minimal contact with the outside world, it wouldn’t be surprising to have some trouble recalling even the name of the next town over. But apparently, for as isolated as it was, Rostruch had no special impulse to shut out strangers.

Wow. This place really is wealthy.

The young man’s clothes and his healthy complexion were evidence enough of that. He didn’t seem terribly guarded, even with a stranger he was meeting for the first time, and perhaps that spoke to the peace Rostruch enjoyed. Poverty and insecurity usually had devastating effects: the fear of starvation drove people to regard others first and foremost as enemies who might steal their food.

But… it looks like maybe they don’t have metallurgy?

The shrine float was made entirely of wood, largely from timbers lashed together. Yukinari didn’t see any nails. And the young man in front of him didn’t seem to be wearing any metal ornaments. Or, for that matter, any buttons.

It’s almost like traditional Japanese clothing…

The details were different, but the lack of buttons and the use of a belt to hold everything in place was very similar to traditional Japanese clothing as Yukinari remembered it.

Come to think of it, Fiona said there was a swamp near Rostruch.

Japan had more swamps than average for its land area. Perhaps geographic and climatic similarities to Japan had produced a similar style of dress.

“My apologies, Friedlandian visitors, but you’ve come just as we’re celebrating a very important ritual to our erdgod, Yggdra.” The young man turned back to the procession.

“Yeah, we figured as much,” Yukinari said. “Don’t mind us.” He shared a look with Dasa, then went on. “Those people on the float… Are they sacrifices? It seems like a lot of them are older…”

It could have been considered a provocative question. With no idea how the young man would react, Yukinari prepared to grab Durandall as he spoke.

“Sacrifices? Oh! Well, I suppose you could call them that,” the man said with an exaggerated nod. “It’s true we are offering those people to Lord Yggdra. You’re surprised by the number of elderly… Does Friedland offer the young instead?”

“Well… kind of, yeah.” Yukinari nodded, thinking of Berta. Apparently, the former erdgod had considered young girls the tastiest, so she and girls like her had been sent as sacrifices.

“In Rostruch, age doesn’t matter. I guess there are a lot of older people, but it only makes sense. Their bodies are weak, after all.” The young man wore a cheerful smile as he spoke. “Those are their families pulling the float.”

Yukinari and Dasa looked at each other, shocked. Had these families volunteered their elders as sacrifices? Yukinari took another look at the people pulling the shrine float, but there was no sign of grief on their faces. Perhaps their sense of guilt was simply dead, as it had been in Friedland’s priests.

“I must excuse myself. If you would kindly wait here in town? The mayor lives in the large building to the north, so if you have business, please…”

“Sorry, can I ask one more thing?” Yukinari said, looking at the float. “These sacrifices—any chance you choose them based on who’s closest to death? The very old, the incurably ill, the gravely wounded, that sort of thing?”

The young man nodded evenly. “Yes, of course.”

●

They made it to the mayor’s house easily. They left Sleipnir by the town gate and walked down the street the young man had indicated, heading more or less north. The streets were laid out in a neat grid, so there was little chance of getting lost.

Along the way, Yukinari took in the town. He was especially interested in what made it different from Friedland, and in that respect the first thing he noticed was how much water there was. Several small streams flowed through the city, each clear and clean, with plants growing and fish swimming in them. Several bridges spanned the streams, another unique element of Rostruch’s scenery. The bridges were made of wood, generally rough-hewn. Presumably the tools used to cut and fashion the wood were metal, but in the whole town Yukinari saw nothing actually made of it.

If he could figure out what this town needed, it might be possible to establish trade that was beneficial to both Friedland and Rostruch. If this

place wanted metal products, Yukinari could produce them himself, so long as they weren't too complicated.

And then they arrived at the mayor's house. They asked the servant who emerged from within to kindly announce them, and then they set to waiting.

The servant reemerged a moment later. "The chief will see you. But... Truth be told, some other visitors arrived just before you. If you would be so kind as to wait for a while..."

"Sure. As long as you need."

The servant bowed and ushered Yukinari and Dasa into the house. The mayor's home was a single-story building that somehow gave the distinct impression of being Japanese. Yukinari didn't see any sliding paper doors, but there didn't seem to be an excessive number of doors at all, or walls either. It looked like the place was probably best with the windows open and a breeze blowing through it.

"Gosh. It's all so familiar..."

"It is?" Leave it to Dasa to pick up on his quiet murmur. She gave him a questioning look as they walked side by side together.

"Yeah. There were a lot of houses like this in my previous world. Well, not a lot, I guess, but I've definitely seen places built like this one." Japan in the twenty-first century had far fewer of these simple, single-story homes than it used to, especially in the cities.

"This way, please," the servant said, leading them along. The area they were shown to was partitioned off by screens. It seemed they were to wait just past one of them. Yukinari and Dasa came around the screen to find two chairs seemingly made out of wicker and a single small desk. As Japanese as the place felt, apparently they still didn't sit on cushions around here.

Yukinari let out a breath and sat in one of the chairs. Dasa seated herself across from him. She watched his face for a moment, then said, "Yuki." She sounded somehow as if she had made up her mind about something. "Earlier... The erdgod's—"

"I know." He interrupted her with a frown. "Fiona told me there was probably an erdgod here, but I didn't expect to run into a ritual the minute we showed up."

Dasa was probably disturbed that Yukinari had seen the procession earlier and hadn't done anything about it. After all, when he had stumbled across Friedland's sacrifice—*i.e.*, Berta—he had put a stop to it through sheer physical force. He felt more than a little resentment toward the townspeople and priests who were angry that he had interfered with their sacrifice.

Yukinari hated the entire system of living sacrifices. Granted, what happened with Berta had come about almost by accident, but Dasa probably believed that if Yukinari were to encounter another sacrifice, he would similarly fight to protect the victims. And she may have been concerned that he would interrupt the ceremony in Rostruch when they encountered it.

But of course, if he simply barged in and upset the ceremony, the same thing could happen in Rostruch as had in Friedland. Perhaps he could kill the erdgod and stop the sacrifices, but ultimately that would only leave Rostruch in the same place as Friedland. Yukinari had come here in hopes of improving the situation in his village, and murdering another god would not advance that agenda.

Still… Yukinari hadn't done anything at all about the procession they saw leaving the gate. He had simply watched. And why was this situation, in Rostruch, different from that in Friedland? All this was probably on Dasa's mind.

"Look, Dasa… Have you ever heard of Mt. Obasute?"

"Mount… what?"

"Uh, never mind. There's no way you could know it." Yukinari offered an ambivalent smile and shook his head. "I guess hospitals have replaced that mountain, anyway."

Dasa gave him a blank look.

"It's something from my previous world. Mt. Obasute—the name actually means 'abandoning the elderly.' Supposedly, when people got old and weak, they would be left on that mountain. Families were so poor they could barely afford to feed themselves, let alone someone who couldn't contribute anything. Try to support your elderly family member, and you'd just end up dying yourself."

"Yuki, did… Did you go… to abandon someone… too?" She blinked, perhaps from surprise.

"Huh? Oh, no, no, I'm just saying it was supposedly an old custom. By the time I was born, that was decades or even centuries in the past."

Yes: in Yukinari's mind, that story belonged to the past. But in this world—in Rostruch—it seemed to be alive and well, and perfectly accepted. The young man who had explained the procession to Yukinari and Dasa had seemed entirely calm. Perhaps the people of this town were simply thinning the ranks of their elderly under the guise of sacrificing them to the erdgod. So Yukinari thought at first, anyway.

"But then again, this town looks pretty wealthy. Or at least, people seem to have more than they need. It doesn't seem like straits are dire enough to demand abandoning the elderly."

"You might be… right."

"There was one boy on that shrine float, too. And everyone was asleep. So I'm wondering if maybe it's a form of euthanasia."

"Euth…anasia?"

"Not that I'm sure being sacrificed to an erdgod is an easy way to go," Yukinari said, slouching back in his chair. "In my previous world, there were a lot of people who couldn't even breathe on their own, but machines would breathe for them, keep them alive. There was no way they were going to get better, it was just about extending their physical lives. Nobody benefited

from it. So some people… they just stopped the machines. And other people argued about whether it was right to do it."

"If you stop those machines…"

"The people die, of course. You're essentially killing them," Yukinari said bluntly. "But it's not like you're cutting them down with a sword or strangling them or something. You're just letting nature take its course with someone who no longer really has the power to live…"

Dasa blinked repeatedly, not saying a word.

"Other people, they might be sick. They're hurting, they're in a lot of pain. But there's no cure. They're not going to get better, either. Some people think we should kill people like that, rather than drawing out their suffering. You let them die peacefully instead. That's euthanasia."

"And you think that… procession… is… euthanasia?"

"I think it's possible. And once I had that thought, I couldn't let it go." Then he gave a long sigh, pressing his palms against his eyes. People too old, too sick, to have any hope of recovery. Letting them go gently might be the compassionate thing to do, but it put an immense emotional burden on the people who actually had to do it. So instead they let the erdgod handle it, in the form of sacrifices. And in consuming the sacrifices, the erdgod warded off the dissipation of its own sense of self. Essentially, both sides benefited.

Could it really be right, then, for Yukinari to put a stop to that ritual? Friedland, Rostruch, and probably many other towns had forged their connections with their erdgods over hundreds of years. The systems involved were firmly in place. Was it right to destroy such things? Or not?

"…Yuki…" Dasa rose from her seat and went over to him. She took one of the hands he had pressed to his own eyes and put it against her cheek. "Whether you're right… or… wrong, I'm on your side."

"Dasa…"

"The logic doesn't… matter."

Yukinari didn't speak.

"If you don't like… it, destroy it. The sacrifices… The erdgod. I'll always be on your… side."

She closed her eyes, as if she were trying to study the feeling of his hand. For a moment, he soaked in the warmth of her cheek, but then—

"I apologize for the wait, Master Yukinari," a voice said from the other side of the partition. Dasa quickly let go of Yukinari's hand, and he pulled away from her. The servant poked his head around the blind. "The mayor will see you now. If you'll follow me?"

A shout went up as Yukinari and Dasa were walking after him.

"*You*?!"

Yukinari turned to see what the commotion was, and found himself face to face with two familiar-looking knights and two priests in the white garments of Friedland's clergy. And one of them was…

"Luman?"

The priest from the orphanage.

"Why are *you* here?!" the priest demanded. The two knights, presumably two of the Harris Church missionaries who had come to Friedland, put their hands on the swords at their hips. With their statue annihilated, they lived in Friedland like defanged animals, but apparently here in Rostruch they had no qualms about showing open hostility toward Yukinari.

"Him! That's him!" exclaimed the priest next to Luman, pointing at Yukinari. "He is the cursed demon, the Godslayer!"

Yukinari squinted and, without a word, reached back for Durandall. He'd slain a god all right, that was true enough. The question was who that priest was shouting to. Simply telling the people of Rostruch about Yukinari would do no harm to him, and therefore be of no benefit to the priests. If they had come all the way here, it meant they thought something in Rostruch would allow them to oppose him. But what, or how?

"This boy..." Someone appeared behind Luman. "...is the Godslayer you speak of?"

"A girl...?" Dasa whispered.

So it was. It was a girl, or appeared to be. A female child so young that Dasa, just a young woman herself, was justified in using the term "girl."

She looked normal at first glance. But her hair was green, and she had horns like a stag—no, like the gnarled branches of a tree. It was always possible they were simply a headpiece, or a decoration, but...

She sure doesn't seem like a regular child to me, Yukinari thought.

She exuded *something*, something that made her seem utterly other. To Yukinari, she appeared to be a locus of vastly more power than the erdgod he had felled, any of the demigods or xenobeasts he had encountered, or even the statue of the guardian saint. Yukinari was not normally capable of sensing "spiritual power," but when there was so much of it at once it naturally became an almost physical phenomenon, surrounding her like a shimmering haze.

She was no girl. She wasn't even human.

"Even he!" Luman shouted, stabbing a finger at Yukinari. "He himself is the monster who killed our god! He is our enemy, and he is your enemy. If you leave him be, you and your familiars will surely pay the price! The very fact that he is here is the proof!"

"Listen to you blather," Yukinari muttered, drawing Durandall from its holster on his back. "Thought you'd get one of the neighbor gods to punish me, huh?"

"...Yuki...!" Dasa opened her bag and pulled out Red Chili, moving to cover Yukinari's back. "Behind... us!"

"I know." An overwhelming sensation pressed in from all sides. The missionary knights and the priests backed off, replaced by several human figures that surrounded Yukinari and Dasa. Some were old and some young, some were men and some women, but all of them exuded the same powerful

aura as the girl—and all of them had the same green hair and horns. It seemed none of them were human, either. Most likely…

Luman sounded a cry: “O familiars of Lord Yggdra, and First Familiar Ulrike! Mete out divine punishment upon the accursed Godslayer!”

●

To be a merchant caravan in this area was to risk one’s life for one’s business. Small bands of people separated from the larger settlements as they went somewhere else were ideal prey for demigods and xenobeasts. These monsters were not so much interested in humans proper as they were in their brains, the source of intelligence and spiritual power, which the creatures could consume as the quickest way to increase their own spiritual power level. Most demigods and xenobeasts had originally been wild animals—with all the aggression that entailed.

Of course, the main roads in areas that had some kind of pact with an erdgod were relatively safe—but take one step outside such a place, and the danger increased exponentially. Sometimes an especially powerful demigod might even encroach on an erdgod’s territory.

Hence, merchant parties were always armed. The merchants themselves carried weapons, and many hired mercenaries. Obviously, five or ten armed men would have a hard time fending off a herd of xenobeasts or felling a demigod. The armaments were essentially a way of buying themselves enough time to get back to erdgod-controlled territory, or inside a city. What they carried was chiefly ranged weapons: slingshots, Molotov cocktails, bows and arrows, throwing spears, nets. They were not so foolish as to bring swords or pikes or anything else that might involve going toe to toe with a xenobeast or demigod.

Most of the time, this was enough to allow them to escape.

But by the time they heard the roar of rippling air, it was too late. First, the head of the mercenary leading the expedition from horseback disappeared. It was like a bad joke: one second it was there, then you blinked, and it was gone; not even his helmet was left. Instead there was only a geyser of blood spewing red liquid all over his corpse. Finally, as if it had just now realized it was dead, the body tilted, fell over, and flopped on the ground.

“Wh-What the hell?!” the shaken mercenaries and merchants demanded. They looked left and right, searching desperately for their attacker. But they couldn’t find it. Couldn’t see anything. There were no xenobeasts or demigods anywhere around them. No sign of an animal like a bear or a tiger.

Then one of the merchants made a dumbfounded sound.

“Huh?”

A bloody helmet dropped at his feet, bouncing before it rolled to a stop. It was the one the missing head had been wearing.

“It’s above us?!” The mercenaries finally realized where they should be looking, and craned their necks to peer at the sky. Then they saw it—and it

was coming down at them at a fantastic speed, as though falling from the sky. A massive birdlike creature with four wings.

“Run awa—”

The flying demigod hurtled directly into the middle of the merchants and mercenaries. The second one to lose his head was the merchant who had been riding on the driver’s platform of the carriage.

“Grrryyyahhh! Brains!” the monster-bird exclaimed gleefully as it floated above them. It broke open the head it had torn off with its claws and beak, extending its unnaturally long tongue to sip at what was within.

“Brains! Brains! Gray matter! AH, DELICIOUS!”

A maelstrom of confusion and terror gripped the party. Flying demigods were extremely unusual. Both the merchants and the mercenaries were armed exclusively with weapons designed to fight other creatures that stayed on the ground. In fact, even if they knew about the existence of flying demigods, they knew of no way to build a weapon with the range and power to fight something like this.

“Brains, brains! I NEED more braiNSSSSS! Slurp slurp!”

“Hrrrk—?!”

The demigod took advantage of the chaos among the humans to plunge down among them again. What followed was a slaughter. Its beak and claws cut down one mercenary and merchant after another. Some of the hired muscle tried to run, but this only seemed to incense the creature, who would pierce them through the belly with one of its claws before devouring them from the head down.

The birdlike demigod screeched and crowed as it broke open the men’s skulls, greedily drinking what came out. The eyes of the pitiful victims rolled up into their heads and their limbs spasmed, until the demigod took one bite, then two, and then at last swallowed the body of its prey.

“as iF tHe liKEs... liKES.... LiKes of a human cOUld kilL mE. More brAIns... mORe...!”

It howled happily, almost as if it were singing, as it went about feasting on the humans.

It was the demigod Yukinari had failed to kill in the valley near Friedland several days before.

●

Yukinari immediately decided this was a bad place to be.

Dasa had drawn Red Chili, but he wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her close, and set off running.

“Yuki—?!”

“We’re getting out of here!” he shouted, dashing down the hall of the mayor’s mansion. He kicked out the shutter of a window, then leaped out with Dasa in tow, ignoring the splinters that flew everywhere. He rolled once as he hit the ground, then, not even sparing the time to brush off the dirt and dust, he grabbed Dasa again and kept running.

“Yuki... Why...?”

“That thing’s bad news. There are all kinds of reasons I don’t want to fight it,” he said as he ran. “I know it looks human, but I guarantee we’d be in trouble if we let that trick us into trying to fight it.”

“…He called it a… ‘familiar.’”

“Yeah. Sort of an outward manifestation of the local erdgod, a terminal. It looks like a person, but it’s connected right to the erdgod’s power…!”

In particular, that first familiar to emerge—Ulrike, she’d been called—had been immensely powerful. Normally it wasn’t possible to see spiritual power with the naked eye, but in her it had been so concentrated as to appear like a visible haze. Yukinari didn’t know exactly what form this erdgod Yggdra took, but he was clearly different by an order of magnitude from the erdgod Yukinari had fought in Friedland. It was even possible that the body of the familiar called Ulrike was simultaneously the erdgod’s body.

Not to mention, this erdgod had at least ten other familiars, even if they weren’t as powerful as Ulrike. Numbers alone would have put Yukinari and Dasa at a disadvantage.

“Those familiars must all have started as sacrifices…!” Ulrike was obviously a small girl, but all the other familiars had also appeared to be very old, or very young, or otherwise had given the impression of being weak. Yukinari could only speculate, but it seemed Yggdra used his sacrifices as familiars. They presumably moved and acted as a part of his body.

Whatever the case, the overwhelming appearance of frailty made it very difficult for Yukinari to want to fight them. But his opponents, perhaps taken in by Luman, seemed completely convinced that Yukinari was the “Godslayer”—and they had every intention of destroying him.

He couldn’t fight like this. It would just wind up with him and Dasa being picked off.

Yukinari glanced back. “Of course they’d follow us…”

The familiars were behind them, Ulrike at their head. Some of the familiars even jumped from rooftop to rooftop, like ninja. No matter what they might look like, they apparently had superhuman mobility.

“Yuki, I can run. Put me down.” It wasn’t the first time Dasa had made this request, but Yukinari didn’t listen. He needed to at least get a little more distance, or the familiars would catch them. If they really wanted to punish him specifically for being the Godslayer, it was possible they wouldn’t hurt Dasa at all. But with Luman and his friends on Yggdra’s side, Dasa’s being taken hostage was a very real possibility. That would only make this an even bigger crisis for Yukinari.

“Damn it all! What a pain in the ass!”

Holding Dasa under his left arm, he pulled out Durandall with his right hand and made as if to fire—he worked the lever, chambering the first round. Then he picked a direction and fired a warning shot.

He didn’t hit anything, of course. Even if he had been intending to fire at his pursuers, it would have been extremely hard to do while running with Dasa at his hip.

But then—

“Meet your end, Godslayer.”

With those words, Ulrike leaped upward from her place at the vanguard. Her white robes fluttered in the breeze, and, still in midair, she gave a single wave of the branch in her hand.

With a start, Yukinari collapsed. Something had trapped his leg. What?

He looked around, and was astonished to see what appeared to be a tree root. It hadn’t been there a moment ago, but now it was popping out of the ground and had wrapped itself around Yukinari’s leg. His momentum thwarted, he had no choice but to fall.

Still holding Dasa, he landed smack on his behind. Ulrike brought her branch down as she landed. At first glance, it looked thin enough to break between two fingers, but—

Sitting there on the ground, Yukinari somehow managed to bring Durandall up with his right hand, catching the branch with its blade.

“Hrgh!” The impact that ran down his arm felt as if he had intercepted an iron rod, not a twig. It was so heavy. Much heavier than such a waifish little girl should have been able to hold, much heavier than any branch of that size should have been. It felt as if he had blocked a blow from a powerful xenobeast.

“Yuki…!” Dasa brought up Red Chili and opened fire on Ulrike.

But the shots didn’t hit. In the blink of an eye, trees and branches and vines and ivies sprouted up, weaving themselves together to form an impenetrable wall between the familiar and her quarry. The softer tips on Dasa’s .44 Magnum bullets couldn’t get through the multi-layered defensive wall.

“Aw, that’s not even fair!” Yukinari groaned. He freed his leg from the root, grabbed up Dasa, and resumed running.

Apparently Yggdra—and his familiars—were capable of controlling any kind of plant life around Rostruch. He didn’t know how, but they could make the plants grow with preternatural speed, or move normally immobile branches and vines to form walls or set traps.

Meaning as long as we’re in Rostruch, we’re in the belly of the beast!

Any advantage they might have would be as good as negated by that fact. And what was more…

“What’s going on?”

“Lord Yggdra’s familiars!”

“Hey! Look! It’s Lady Ulrike!”

“Are they chasing that man?”

“Wonder if he did something to earn himself some divine punishment?”

“Hey, you two, wait!”

So far from being afraid of Ulrike and the others, the townspeople seemed to be showing her great respect as she chased Yukinari and Dasa through the city. Then, sporadically, the villagers began standing in front of Yukinari, trying to block his way.

This was bad. He was already at a disadvantage here—if everyone in town decided he was an enemy, he would be completely trapped.

"Yuki... The people here adore... their erdgod..."

"Sure looks that way!"

He kept running, dodging root after root that burst through the ground and threatened to trip him. As an angel, he was endowed with exceptional nimbleness and endurance that allowed him to keep this up, but a normal person would have long ago been captured.

They're definitely not like the erdgod-worshippers in Friedland.

In his village, there had been profound awe of the local deity, but no sense of closeness. It was only natural. The people were dealing with a creature that may have assured good harvests, but also ate human beings. There was no rat that felt intimacy with any cat.

By contrast, the people of Rostruch apparently felt something like affection for their erdgod, Yggdra. For example, the young man they had talked to at the procession earlier hadn't shown any terror or disgust at the notion of making these sacrifices to his god.

Which presumably meant...

"Yuki... There aren't as many familiars chasing us now."

"Huh...?"

He glanced back, just for a second, and saw Dasa was right: where ten familiars had been after them before, now there were only three. Ulrike was still charging at the front, but...

"If... we're careful, we might lose... them."

"Do you figure each familiar has a different level of ability?"

"That's... certainly possible."

They might be connected to the erdgod, but if the sacrificed humans' bodies remained in any capacity, then of course they would eventually reach their physical limit. Hobbling old people and tiny children could still only run so fast or jump so far, even if they shared some of the power of the erdgod.

If we can somehow lose the three that are still chasing us, we might be able to get away...

Yukinari replaced Durandall across his back, instead pulling out the several .44 Magnum bullets he had in his pocket.

"Sorry, Dasa. Gonna have to set you down."

"I understand."

He stopped just long enough to put her on her feet, and then the two of them resumed running. Yukinari placed the cartridges between his palms and focused his attention.

It didn’t have to be complicated. And the internals could be recycled. A tube packed with black gunpowder and a detonator, capped with an explosive to start things burning. Around this, a mixture of magnesium and metaldehyde powders, commonly used as a fire-starter at campsites. The fuse could be the same as in a gun. A length of wire could run from the trigger so it wouldn’t go off in his hand.

He could only manage a crude version of the weapon, but it would have to do. With his powers of physical reconstitution, Yukinari produced a metal cylinder just a little bit larger than a 350mL bottle of juice.

“And now…” Yukinari picked a large building nearby and kicked down the door. “Sorry for inviting myself in!” he said as he entered, but there was no response. It looked like he had judged correctly: this wasn’t a house, but a storage space. There were only one or two small windows, probably to help change the air, up near the ceiling; the interior was dark, and there were several piles of wooden chests.

Perfect.

Yukinari looked back—and flung the cylinder he was holding. It tumbled through the air, trailing what looked like a thread, until it was just above Ulrike and the other pursuing familiars.

“Dasa, close your eyes!” Yukinari shouted, and pulled on the thread.

The fuse did its job, and a second later, the flashbang he had created in such a hurry went off.

For an instant, the inside of the storehouse was filled with a light so bright as to blot out everything else. Anyone who looked directly at it would be briefly blinded. And all the worse if your eyes had started to become accustomed to the darkness.

“…All right.”

When he opened his eyes, he found Ulrike and the other two familiars standing there, evidently unable to see. At least, they weren’t running directly toward him and Dasa.

This was his chance. Yukinari made for the nearest wall and slapped his right hand against it.

Physical reconstitution.

In the next instant, there was a bluish-white flash and part of the wall turned to dust, leaving a hole big enough for a person to walk through. When he didn’t have to create anything, but was simply absorbing structural information, he was capable of this sort of tactic.

“Dasa.”

“…Mn.”

He took her under his left arm again. For the moment, when he looked back, he didn’t see any of Yggdra’s familiars.

●

Justin Chambers ordered everyone out of his office, where he proceeded to shut himself in. He allowed only one person to remain: the alchemist—and his rumored lover—Jaroslava Vernak. They had frequently been alone in

his rooms together even before he had become Dominus Doctrinae, leaving many to make base insinuations about their relationship.

But if any had had both the opportunity and the audacity to peek into Justin's chambers at that moment, they would have been disappointed. And then they would have been shocked by what they heard.

Jaroslava sat on the bench facing Justin's work desk. "About the new angel," she said. She sounded almost bored. "How's the Church feeling these days?"

"It's a touchy subject. There's been a good deal of resistance to the creation of new angels ever since the incident with the Blue Angel. There are fears that another new one might escape, too. There are even those who believe we should get rid of all of our angels," Justin said, running his eyes over some papers on his desk.

"They're afraid." Jaroslava seemed to be enjoying herself. "They thought those things were nothing but tools. Now they lie awake at night wondering when the next one is going to turn and bite them. It's adorable. Although it'll never happen."

The event had shaken the Church so badly that it had given rise to a number of misunderstandings—specifically, misapprehensions about cause and effect in the case. The "Blue Angel" had killed the previous Dominus, along with five other high-ranking members of the Church and no less than thirty of the knights of the Holy Order who guarded them. But this creature —this "Bluesteel Blasphemer," as he was also known—was a special case.

Angels were never meant to be self-aware. They were intended to be living dolls. The alchemists used a human "soul"—or something they called by this name—to control the spiritual power that allowed these living alchemical devices to function. But because the Church could hardly abide their tools, the angels, acting of their own accord, everything that might make the creature human was stripped away before an angel was awakened. This was the case with all twelve of the examples created before the Bluesteel Blasphemer.

But for reasons no one could fathom, an alchemist—Jirina Urban was her name—charged with creating the thirteenth angel under the authority of the previous Dominus, failed to remove the sense of self attached to the soul. In other words, she had skipped a step of the process and created an angel with self-consciousness.

She was put to death for that—and it was only upon learning of this that the Bluesteel Blasphemer went insane. Meaning the "Blue Angel" had not run amok for no reason, but had been exacting revenge for the murder of its "mother," Jirina. The chance of the other angels going berserk was, for all intents and purposes, zero. And yet...

"Even so, I don't believe their caution is entirely unwarranted." Finally, Justin looked up at Jaroslava. "You recommended that a fourteenth angel—one with a sense of self, just like the Blasphemer—should be created, yes?"

“I did. And I stand by that.” Jaroslava smiled and nodded. “Tools and puppets are well and good for the missionaries. More than enough to put on a few miracles. But killing your Bluesteel Blasphemer? The angels we have will be less than useless. Puppets are only puppets; they can’t move any faster than the person pulling their strings.” She spoke casually, as if what she was saying was completely obvious. “A puppet that needs precise instructions from its puppeteer has no hope of defeating the Bluesteel Blasphemer. Even just in terms of how quickly it can accomplish physical reconstitution, there will be no contest.”

The incident with the Bluesteel Blasphemer could safely be called the worst in the Church’s history. The public absolutely had to be prevented from learning that one of the angels had gone on a rampage and killed almost forty people, including the leader of the Church and several of his closest associates. If the rank-and-file believers found out, their faith in the Church would be deeply shaken.

Naturally, an event of this magnitude was known to many in the Church. But publicly, they announced that the previous Dominus Doctrinae had been killed when a new church building he was inspecting collapsed. The true details were kept tightly under wraps.

This also meant it was impossible to form a large, and therefore obvious, group to hunt down and destroy the Bluesteel Blasphemer. If they were going to kill it, they would have to do so quietly. They would have to assassinate it.

Even the Bluesteel Blasphemer was not immortal; there had to be a way to kill it. Perhaps several ways. But in a one-on-one fight, it was almost impossible that a human could prevail over this self-aware angel. And while their own angels might have similar abilities, the puppet could never win.

What they needed was a small group of individuals who had the powers of angels and could use them autonomously. The smaller the number of people involved, the better, as it would help prevent the story from becoming public.

Justin drummed his fingers. “I’ll handle the internal opposition somehow.” His fingers tapped the hard surface of his desk, as if he were keeping time or counting something. It was his habit whenever he was considering a problem. “And you, Jaroslava Vernak. The question is whether you can create an angel on a par with that produced by Jirina Urban. I’m given to understand that she was by far the most accomplished among our alchemists who specialize in homunculi.”

Jaroslava shrugged. “I’d like to give you my unqualified reassurance,” she said. “But Jirina Urban was an extremely capable alchemist. She had the accumulated knowledge of generations of the Urban family, and I’m sure she was a better crafter of homunculi than I am. But she left quite a few notes. I doubt it will be that hard to use them to create something that can do battle with the Bluesteel Blasphemer.”

“And the soul for the spiritual-power control apparatus?”

“I have an idea, of course.”

“Very well.” Justin looked back down at his papers. “In that case, I want you to be prepared, so you can create our angel at any time.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

“I have no special interest in anything so noble as revenge for my predecessor.” Justin’s fingers started tapping again. “But this is a creature that hates us, whose very existence is a blight upon the Church, and that furthermore is all but invincible in battle. Such a creature’s continued existence can only ever be a threat to us. We must pull this problem out by the roots.”

“As you say, O most holy Dominus Doctrinae.” Jaroslava made a theatrical gesture with one hand, as if she were making a solemn vow—but she almost seemed amused.

●

It would be foolish to go straight back to where Sleipnir was parked. Yukinari didn’t know whether the participants in the procession had seen him and Dasa arrive on the motorized vehicle, but if they had, there could very well be an ambush there. If the townspeople had been mobilized, and the two of them ended up surrounded, there would be no escaping again—or perhaps there would, but it would involve killing some of the people of Rostruch, and certainly the familiar, Ulrike.

Yukinari very much wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

Admittedly, part of him thought the idea was naïve, that it was too late for a peaceful resolution, but—call him a fool for pacifism—he couldn’t shake his revulsion at the thought of shooting women and children. He had died and been reborn in this new world, and he believed the personality that underlay his identity as Yukinari was formed by a system of values he had been able to embrace because of his previous, peaceful life in modern Japan.

“Yuki…”

“Hush.” He put a finger to Dasa’s lips, then crept into the abandoned building he’d spotted. It was made of wood, just like all the others, but it was damaged in places; it didn’t seem anyone had been keeping it up.

He was considering hiding out in it until things with Ulrike had blown over.

“Who are you?”

Yukinari stiffened at the sudden question. This was bad. He had assumed the place was abandoned, but apparently there was someone here. If they shouted, they could easily bring the familiars or the townspeople back down on their heads. Should he run? Try to silence the resident of this house? But even in the instant he was trying to make up his mind –

“Ahh, the looks made you think this place was abandoned, didn’t they? I can’t do any repairs, so it just keeps getting worse. I’m so embarrassed.”

The voice was very thin, but kind; there was no hint of worry. Yukinari and Dasa proceeded cautiously inside, keeping a careful watch on their

surroundings. And there, within, sat the owner of the voice. Or maybe *sat up* would be a more accurate way of putting it.

A man was propped up in bed. He had probably been lying down until a moment earlier. His voice was as frail as an elderly man's, but his face—especially his eyes—suggested he was still young. But his cheeks were thin, his hands skin and bones. He must be sick. And something serious, in its final stages. You could tell at a glance.

"Sorry," Yukinari said. "We were kinda being chased..." If the man wasn't going to shout, then it would certainly be better to deal peacefully with him.

"Chased?"

"Well, uh..."

"There's no need to stand. Please, have a seat." The man gestured to Yukinari, showing no sign of suspicion.

Yukinari didn't respond immediately. He noticed that Dasa had pulled out her "ears" and put them on her head. These were a sound-gathering device shaped like animal ears. She had spent so long unable to see that she could use her ears almost as well as her eyes, and sometimes better, to grasp what was going on around her. This device capitalized on that ability.

Dasa, too, said nothing at first, but she nodded at him. As long as she was listening, the familiars wouldn't be able to sneak up on them. But then she was already leaning in and whispering to Yukinari:

"Inside. Someone's breathing." Apparently the man wasn't alone in this house.

"Okay, thanks," Yukinari said, taking a seat on a wooden bench. Dasa sat next to him.

"Mother," the man said. "Mother, we have visitors." For some reason, he looked to the ceiling as he spoke.

This house, like the others, was just one story. He couldn't be calling to the second floor. Which meant...

"They seem like they're in a bit of trouble. I thought I might let them rest here for a while. Is that okay?"

There was no audible answer. Yukinari and Dasa watched silently. The man gave an awkward smile.

"My mother's quite old already. And I'm sick, as you can see, and don't have much longer. Lately I've become unable to see."

"Unable... to... see...?"

That detail got a reaction from Dasa, probably because she herself had been born blind. She sounded nonchalant, but her words contained a note of sympathy—no, empathy. As ever, it was a hint so faint only Yukinari could detect it, but...

"Yes, more or less." The man who said he was blind seemed to notice it as well. Perhaps, like Dasa, his hearing had improved in order to compensate for his lost vision. A soft smile floated on his face. "I admit it

can be inconvenient, but I'm not scared. Because it means soon I can go to be with our Lord Yggdra."

Dasa looked from the man to Yukinari with a startled expression. Yukinari gave her a slight nod, then asked as gently as he could, "Lord Yggdra... He's the erdgod of this area, right?"

"Now, this is unusual... Are you strangers?"

"Yes. Uh, travelers."

"Is that so? What a surprise. Yes, as you say, Lord Yggdra is our erdgod. The Lord is our protector, our mother."

"Mother...?" Yukinari squinted when this word came up.

"We are born into the land Lord Yggdra rules, suckle at the teat of Lord Yggdra's blessings, and one day return to the Lord. Some of us, like me and my mother, sooner than others."

Did that mean becoming a sacrifice? But there was no trace of fear in the boy's voice. Apparently, people in this town really did see being offered to Yggdra as an easy death. And yet...

"Are you really not afraid at all being sacrificed to the erdgod?" Yukinari asked.

"A sacrifice...?" The man seemed perplexed by the expression. "A sacrifice... Ahh, I see. You mean a living sacrifice. I suppose it sounds scary when you put it that way. But to return to Lord Yggdra is a joy. Especially for the elderly, or for those like me who have no hope of recovering from their illness. To live on as a part of Lord Yggdra—as Lady Ulrike does."

So the familiar called Ulrike had started out as a sacrifice, too.

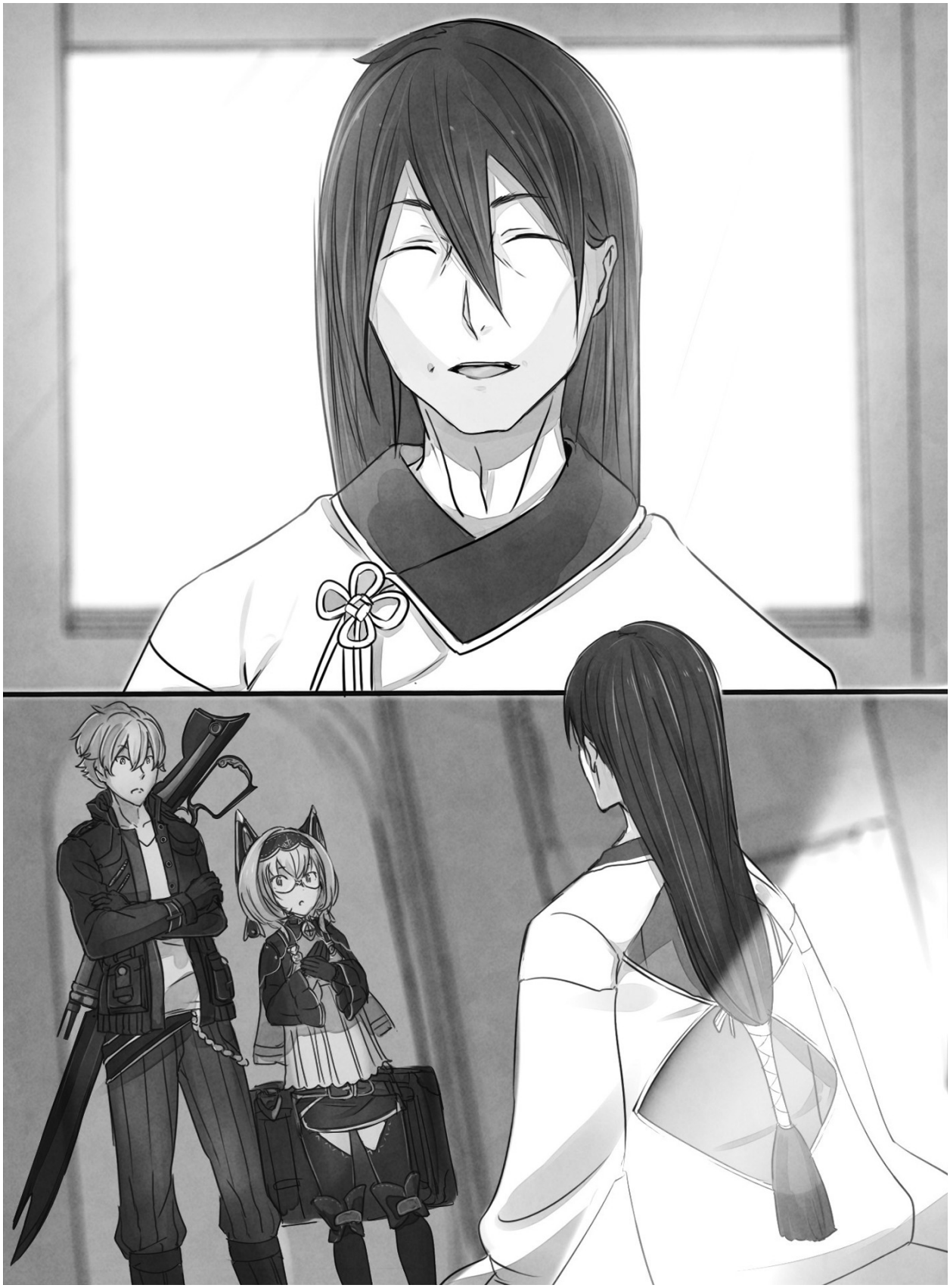
"We simply return to Lord Yggdra."

A sort of return to the womb, huh?

While in their mother's womb, humans feel no anxiety or fear, surrounded and supported by amniotic fluid. "Returning to Lord Yggdra" represented a longing for that time. Many people feel more calm when they're somewhere dark and warm, surrounded—in essence, somewhere like a womb or uterus—and architecture that plays on this desire is common in religious buildings.

This is also related to the idea of rebirth, the notion that there is another life on the far side of death. In this understanding, human life begins from the womb and eventually returns to it, over and over, the soul part of an eternal cycle.

"...Yuki." Dasa gave a tug on Yukinari's sleeve.



“Yeah. He’s…”

The man’s smile didn’t seem the least bit false or affected. He really believed what he was saying, from the bottom of his heart.

Yukinari had thought at first that the sacrifices to Yggdra were about abandoning the elderly to their fate—small sacrifices to protect against a larger tragedy. At least, that would be what people could say to comfort themselves.

But being offered up to Yggdra was obviously not something this person regarded as a tragedy. It wasn’t even euthanasia. It was practically salvation for those who were too weak to have any other hope.

“Yggdra, huh…”

As he looked at the smiling man, Yukinari became convinced that whatever they did next, it would have to involve meeting—not with Yggdra’s familiars, but with the god itself.

Chapter Three: A God’s Homecoming

The metal wheel began to turn, kicking up a cloud of leaf mold.

“There you go, good job.”

Sleipnir—despite being a prototype designed by an amateur, with jury-rigged parts, and never tested for durability—started running with no problem. Not that any of this was due to the gentle praise Yukinari gave it.

They were riding along a narrow mountain pass, the same road the procession had been traveling down. Thankfully, perhaps because the entire crowd had gone out and then come back, ruts and footprints marked the way clearly, and helped Sleipnir’s four wheels bite into the dirt. Where were they going? They would know when they found wherever it was the tracks led to.

But as they drove...

“Yuki.”

“I know.”

Dasa hadn’t needed to warn him—Yukinari had already noticed it. Yggdra’s familiars were pursuing them.

Shadowy figures appeared and disappeared among the trees that lined both sides of the road. They had no trouble keeping up despite the motorcycle’s speed. Granted, Yukinari had to slow the bike down because of the badly pitted path, but even so, he was going faster than walking speed.

The figures didn’t move along the ground, but much higher up. Most likely, they were jumping from branch to branch. Or perhaps they were using vines like ropes, swinging like pendulums in order to move. Whatever the case, just as they had seen in town, every bit of plant life in this area, from the smallest blade of grass to the tallest tree, seemed to be under Yggdra’s control.

Talk about your home-field advantage.

Maybe the barrier of massive trees that surrounded Rostruch was Yggdra’s doing as well. It couldn’t be random, but there was no way it had been made by human hands, either.

“Yggdra is probably—”

“Yuki!”

At Dasa’s cry, Yukinari immediately looked to both sides. Branches were extending from the left and the right, as if to block off the road. They were just plants—they shouldn’t have even possessed the ability to move—but they were advancing so quickly that it was visible to the naked eye. And they were trying to stop Yukinari and Dasa.

Wait. They weren’t moving.

They’re growing at an incredible pace!

Trees simply lack the biological capacity to move the way animals do. They have no joints, no muscles. A very small percentage of them—mimosas, and carnivorous plants like Venus fly traps, for example—certainly

do move, but that's due to changes in cellular pressure as their cells absorb and release water. They can only mechanically repeat the same motions over and over; complex action is still impossible for them.

Anyway, if the plants could have moved freely, then presumably there would have been no need to use familiars like Ulrike. Since the plants couldn't move, Yggdra was causing them to grow very, very fast, straight into Yukinari and Dasa's way. That was why it looked to them like the plants were moving.

"I get it now…!"

If the plants could have moved on their own, they would surely have been an easier way to stop the two travelers. But so far, Sleipnir had been able to evade its botanical pursuers, if only just. That meant the trees couldn't grow as fast as Yukinari could drive.

"…!"

One of the familiars pushed off a branch and jumped at the motorcycle.

The creature was met with a *boom*.

But the .44 Magnum bullet Yukinari had fired simply passed by, failing to hit the opponent.

"Dammit…"

If he hadn't fired, they would have been in danger. Or, perhaps Yukinari wouldn't have. But Dasa, certainly. Yet at the same time, Yukinari still had qualms about shooting the familiars, many of which were women, children, and the elderly. This familiar had the form of an old woman, and she grabbed hold of the two of them.

Yukinari beat her back with Durandall. The woman tumbled away, bouncing across the leaf mold—within the next instant, she grabbed onto a vine that had dropped seemingly out of nowhere, took a great swing, and was kicking against a tree branch to make another pass.

It was an incredible display of physical prowess. And even granting that she had landed on the leaf mold, it was bizarre that she didn't appear to feel so much as discomfort from her fall from a moving vehicle. Maybe Yggdra's divine power had strengthened her body…

"Maybe I've got no choice but to kill them…"

The familiars launched one attack after another. Yukinari tried his best to shoot at them, but it was hard enough while trying to drive Sleipnir, and combined with his compunctions about the issue, he never so much as grazed his opponents. The familiars, for their part, showed no real fear of his weapon, perhaps because they hadn't been harmed by it.

Yukinari almost jumped as one of the familiars finally landed in a heap on Sleipnir's handlebars. She was a small girl with a round face. Maybe it was a trick of the dying light that made her hair, which should have been green, appear black.

There was a moment of near-silence as Yukinari hesitated for an instant. It was only because of a passing resemblance to his sister Hatsune. Then he

spat out a breath and, with it, swept away his indecision. But that was all the time the familiar needed to grab his throat.

“Hrrg...?!”

“Yuki!” Dasa cried, almost a scream.

The familiar possessed inhuman strength. Yukinari immediately threw away Durandall, scrabbling at the hands around his neck, but it was as if they were attached to him—had become a part of him. He couldn’t tear them away. The fingers dug deeper and deeper into his flesh, as if they might tear his head clean off. His vision was turning red. But then...

“Yuki!!”

There was a gunshot right next to Yukinari’s ear. The impact was like a gentle slap on the cheek, and his mind cleared immediately. Someone firing a .44 Magnum right next to your head will do that.

The girl—the familiar—who had been clutching Yukinari’s neck thrashed. At the edge of his vision, he could see her hit the ground. He presumed she’d been shot, probably with Red Chili.

“Dasa...!”

“I’m on your... side, Yuki!” Dasa nearly shouted. “Your... enemy is my... enemy!” In other words, there would be no mercy for anyone who attacked him. Even those he himself hesitated to shoot.

Damn. I’m pathetic...

Dasa’s hands were dirty now because he had foolishly hesitated. Of course, Dasa had shot people before, but only in situations when it had been absolutely necessary, a matter of life and death. It was no sin. Or anyway, so Yukinari thought, and Dasa probably felt the same way.

So it wasn’t the fact that Dasa had done it that was the problem, but rather that, in his mind, he had made her do it.

I’m no better than the people who offer living sacrifices or commit euthanasia!

He was making someone else do what he couldn’t. Just like those who left the priests to handle their sacrifices, or who asked doctors to pull the plug for no other reason than because they couldn’t stand to watch the suffering of a loved one anymore.

“Yuki, you... focus on... Sleipnir.” Dasa fired Red Chili again.

“Are there fewer attacks now?” Yukinari asked. The frequency of the familiars’ attacks had clearly lessened. They still kept pace in the trees, but they had stopped flinging themselves at the motorcycle.

“Look there...”

Among the familiars trailing them through the trees was the girl Dasa had shot. Yukinari didn’t know where she had been hit, but she obviously wasn’t dead.

One of the “horns” on her head was broken. Maybe that was where the bullet had landed. Dasa had probably aimed at the creature’s forehead, but Sleipnir’s rumbling would have made it difficult to shoot precisely.

“I get it. They’ve learned that it hurts to get shot.”

It wasn’t clear whether the familiars actually felt pain, but Yggdra’s supporters had learned what it meant to take a bullet at point-blank range.

Yukinari had another fright as a single familiar dropped down out of the branches and stood in their path.

It was Ulrike.

She must have taken a shortcut to get ahead of them. It wouldn’t have taken very long to figure out where Yukinari and Dasa were headed.

Silently, Ulrike shook her branch. In an instant, roots and branches ensnared Sleipnir. Yukinari tried to plow through them by sheer force…

“Hrn?!”

Sleipnir was lifted up by the rapidly growing tree limbs, its wheels clawing at the sky. It no longer mattered how much horsepower the motorcycle had.

The vehicle hung upside down in the air; Yukinari and Dasa were thrown to the ground. Yukinari grabbed his companion in midair, clutching her to himself. He didn’t quite land neatly on his feet, but at least he could protect her as they came down. He rolled several times, then came to a stop.

Right in front of Ulrike, who stood calmly.

Neither said anything. Yukinari came to one knee, keeping Dasa behind him as he faced down the familiar. But the next second, something stole his attention away from the girl—the huge thing that loomed up behind her.

“So… This must be Yggdra’s true form.” It looked roughly the way he’d imagined it might based on everything that had happened, but it was still staggering to see it for himself.

It was a vast tree, surely more than a thousand years old. The hugeness of it evoked less a living being than a feature of the terrain, like a mountain or a river. It must have been ten meters around and more than a hundred tall. Its branches spread across more than fifty meters from one end to the other. This must be why there was so little plant life around here, even though they were in the mountains—the layers of branches and leaves prevented light from reaching the floor, meaning only groundcover could survive beneath them.

This was an erdgod who had literally put down roots in its land. And it made sense why the creature would use sacrifices as familiars. Its main body couldn’t move from this spot.

“…Yuki, look.” Dasa pointed to the roots of the great tree. A very strange-looking creature, perhaps a xenobeast, had been strangled by the roots. No—with a hard sound, the creature’s neck broke, turning in a disturbing direction. Roots and branches probed into the eyes and nose and ears of the twitching body, sucking it dry in an instant. In this way, not only did Yggdra kill xenobeasts and demigods foolish enough to challenge it, but turned them into nutrition for itself as well.

“Have you given up yet, Godslayer?” Ulrike said haughtily, looking down at Yukinari where he knelt in the dust. The other familiars were keeping

their distance. It looked like there really was something special about this one called Ulrike. None of the others even spoke.

Only Ulrike spoke a human language. Maybe she was the only one with anything resembling human thought. That would make her, in effect, Yggdra's representative. Plants couldn't talk any more than they could move. The familiars, connected directly to Yggdra as they were, acted as its intermediaries with humanity.

Wordlessly, Yukinari set down Dasa, giving her a significant look. He had no guarantee that she understood what he meant by it, but Dasa, the sister and apprentice of the alchemist Jirina Urban, instantly understood what Yukinari had in mind. With things as they stood, the only choice was to fight with all their strength. This wasn't an opponent they were going to survive if they held back in the slightest.

"Given up? Yeah... I guess you could say that." As he spoke, Yukinari made a fist with his right hand and drove it into the earth. At the same time, Dasa moved to one side, opening up a distance from Yukinari.

Ulrike glanced at Dasa, but didn't seem to see her as a threat; the familiar made no move to stop her.

"And... In what way could one say you have given up?" Ulrike—Yggdra—asked.

Yukinari exhaled.

“I’ve given up… On this ending peacefully!”

Even as he answered, he had already begun to transform.

●

The town of Friedland was basically peaceful. There was the concern that a xenobeast or demigod might show up during Yukinari’s absence, but at the moment, there was no sign of any such danger. Guards had been posted at Yukinari’s “sanctuary,” which was the place any would-be challenger was likely to attack first. It was easy enough, as there were already observation platforms around it that had once been used to confirm whether the erdgod had eaten its sacrifice. If anything showed up, the guards would see it immediately.

“I wonder if things are going all right for Yukinari…” Fiona murmured, pausing in her work. Several pieces of paper lay in front of her. Paper was a valuable resource, but it was also the most convenient way to keep the detailed records necessary to administer a town. Sheepskin didn’t last long enough, and wooden scrolls took up too much room. So Fiona bought as much paper as she could when merchants came by.

“I wonder… I don’t know how fast the iron horse Lord Yukinari made can travel.”

Fiona hadn’t been speaking to anyone in particular, but Berta, standing in a corner of the room, answered anyway. Yukinari had asked Berta to help Fiona while he was away with the multitude of little jobs that hounded the deputy mayor, so the girl—aware of her status as Yukinari’s shrine maiden and property—dutifully waited by Fiona’s side to be given some sort of work.

“But Lord Yukinari did say he would be back as soon as he could. Oh, would you like more tea?”

“No, thank you,” Fiona said with a grim smile and a shake of her head. Berta was there to help Fiona, but with no knowledge or experience in administration, there wasn’t much she could do. She could make tea, pick up objects that fell off the desk, and rub Fiona’s tense shoulders—but that was it. Yukinari hadn’t really left Berta to help so much as he was putting her in Fiona’s care. The girl would have been in much greater danger of being attacked if he had left her alone in the sanctuary.

“She’s not a kitten…” Fiona muttered.

“I’m sorry? A kitten? Do you need a—”

“It’s nothing, I was just talking to myself,” Fiona said with a sigh.

“Um… Lady Fiona?” Berta began to speak as though something had suddenly occurred to her. “Is it possible… You know…” But hesitation soon swallowed up the words that might have followed. “Um… Could it be… Oh, I—I’m sorry, never mind.”

“Don’t trail off. You know I hate that.” Fiona frowned, and Berta, almost fearfully, resumed:

“I thought maybe… without Lord Yukinari here… maybe you’re lonely?”

“Huh? What makes you think that?”

“Well, every time you stop writing, you whisper his name…”

This left Fiona to furrow her brow in silence.

“You’re very much in love with Lord Yukinari, aren’t you, Lady Fiona?”

“I only act like that to tease him. I do it because it’s funny. He’s got those godlike powers, but inside he’s just a regular boy… even if he does have some decent ideas from time to time.”

So the things she said to him were simply in jest; she wasn’t especially interested in him as a member of the opposite sex. He had messed with her at one point—something about wanting to get into bed with a cultivated young woman and making her squeal—and she had been paying him back for it ever since.

Truth be told, Yukinari was too over the top for her in a number of ways, and she couldn’t see him as an object of romantic interest at the moment. She felt friendly toward him, certainly, and if he genuinely came seeking her body, she wouldn’t hesitate to respond—but it would be largely out of her duty as deputy mayor.

“Lord Yukinari’s powers aren’t god*like*, he *is* a god.” Berta looked questioningly at her.

“That’s not my point… Berta? You’re way more—I mean, talk about being in love with Yukinari.”

“Yes, of course I am,” Berta said with no detectable embarrassment.

“Yukinari said you don’t have to force yourself to be his shrine maiden or anything, but you still keep following him around… Hey, has he ever actually, y’know, done it with you?”

Berta and Yukinari had been living in the same house together for quite some time now, but as far as Fiona had seen, Yukinari had never laid a finger on her.

Berta provided the final proof: “No, not yet. Since I’m not really capable of anything else, I feel it’s the least I can do for him, but…” She looked down, almost sadly.

“I mean, it’s not your fault…”

Berta was an orphan who had been raised to be a living sacrifice. She barely knew how to do housekeeping or any of the other things that a normal girl might have learned from her parents to help her in the future. She seemed to be good with young children, perhaps because she’d helped raise her younger sisters at the orphanage, but that skill wasn’t much use now that she was serving Yukinari. And needless to say, the priests hadn’t gone out of their way to ensure she had any other particular abilities. Shrine maidens existed for one purpose and one purpose only: to offer up their bodies.

Perhaps that explained Berta’s fixation on giving herself to Yukinari. Since he wasn’t a monster who ate people, the only other thing she could really do was to offer herself to him as a woman.

“Lady Dasa is… You know… Always…” Berta said with her usual hesitation. She seemed to mean that Dasa got in the way, or that Yukinari held back because he was conscious of Dasa being there. From Fiona’s perspective, it was obvious that Dasa was also infatuated with Yukinari, but Yukinari seemed to view her as some kind of younger sister. Sometimes the two of them seemed to be at cross-purposes.

“And now the two of them are off by themselves…”

Now that she thought about it, supposedly they had been traveling together before they arrived in Friedland, as well. If their love had been growing that entire time, Berta couldn’t easily break in now. Perhaps it was the way Berta had been attached at the hip to Yukinari since he arrived in Friedland that somehow seemed to fire Dasa’s emotions, even though Berta herself didn’t realize it.

For better or for worse, Fiona had a pretty good grasp of how others were feeling. But it seemed that she didn’t always bring the same clarity to her own emotions.

“Okay, break’s over,” she said, shaking her head. “You know what? I would like some more tea.”

But at that moment…

Fiona paused and frowned. Had she just heard a voice calling out? She looked at Berta. The other girl seemed to have heard it, too; she was looking dubiously out the window. Fiona stood up from her desk and went over to the window herself. The shutters were open.

She peered out. Everything looked normal in town. She wondered if a fire had broken out, or if maybe a carriage had run over a child, but…

“Berta. What was that just now…?”

“It sounded like a scream, but—”

Before she could finish, the bellow came again—this time clearly. Fiona leaned out the window to try to see what was going on, when suddenly, she was covered in shadow.

She was shocked; something massive had blocked out the sun. In the next instant it had passed over her head, wheeling around far away in the sky. It was a bizarre flying life form with four wings.

“It’s that—”

“—demigod!”

It was the monstrous bird Yukinari had failed to kill several days before.

●

Yukinari’s body was enveloped in a bluish-white light. A miraculous light, the proof that his very body itself was a miracle.

“What is this…?” Even Ulrike—probably even Yggdra, who controlled her—was surprised.

A god created by human hands was about to challenge a god born of nature.

“You uncanny thing…!” Ulrike shouted, and lunged at Yukinari, waving her branch. She sensed that his transformation wasn’t complete yet. She may not have known the details, but she was objectively correct.

“I won’t let you.”

There was a murmur and a gunshot, and then Ulrike was thrown backward. But the second after that, she rolled forward again as if launched by a spring.

“Do you seek to interfere, girl?” There was no blood on Ulrike’s face as she called out. But she was slightly off-balance, staggering just a little. Dasa had aimed at her head—specifically, at one of the “horns” that grew there. It was the same place she’d happened to shoot the other familiar who had attacked them; she had seen that creature blanch and withdraw.

The horns might amount to kill shots for the familiars. Or perhaps they were what connected the familiars to Yggdra, much like how the missionaries had used tuning forks to control the statue of the guardian saint. If she could damage the horns, maybe Ulrike wouldn’t be able to move.

“……Erk.”

Ulrike waved her branch. She was stumbling, but a mass of branches from the trees nearby stretched out toward Yukinari and Dasa, while vines and ivies came flying like ropes.

In the face of them—

“I won’t let… you stop Yuki.” Dasa sniped from a prone position. Five bullets flew at Ulrike, but a wall of roots broke through the earth to shield her. Even Magnum bullets didn’t have the penetrating power to get through it.

Dasa gave a start as, at the same moment, a vine wrapped itself around her right hand. She couldn’t move her gun anymore; she collapsed, and the other familiars, who had kept their distance until that moment, began to approach. They reached for her from every direction…

“Hands off.”

All at once, the familiars went flying.

Ulrike steadied herself, amazed. Standing next to Dasa was a strange-looking knight in blue-black armor. Blue mail over a black foundation. This armor wasn’t just for show: it seemed to fit the figure exactly, almost as if he had been born that way.

But the most striking thing about this knight had nothing to do with his body or his armor. It was the black-crystal wings that grew on his back. They opened and closed gently, almost as though they were breathing, and they must have contained a good deal of heat, because a slight haze rose from them.

The Bluesteel Blasphemer.

This was the “Blue Angel” that had killed the Dominus Doctrinae, the head of the Missionary Order, and a host of other high-ranking Church

officials in the capital, practically in their own home, and then escaped. This was the form that allowed him to make the best use of his power.

“Don’t touch Dasa,” the Bluesteel Blasphemer—the so-called Godslayer—growled. “Don’t hurt her. Don’t cause her any pain. I may forgive anything else, but not that. Even if I’m facing a god.”

Yukinari put his hands together as if in prayer. A bluish-white light flowed between them, and a second later, he pulled a Durandall from each hand, as though extracting them from his own arms.

“Mere hubris, Godslayer,” Ulrike said, slowly backing away. “What you forgive or do not forgive is of no consequence. Do you think you can kill me with those toys?”

“Wanna find out?” Yukinari moved forward, as if pursuing Ulrike.

In the next instant, bullets flew at him from every direction.

●

A vast shadow passed overhead. The huge body turned, quickly enough to set the air spinning, its four wings stirring up little clouds of dust. The monstrous bird of a demigod watched the people below it fleeing in panic, and let out a great cry as if specifically to frighten them.

“Where… Where IS he? Where IS THAT man? I shAll eAT hIM!”

The creature was clearly after Yukinari. But Yukinari had gone to Rostruch, and hadn’t yet come back.

Fiona rushed out into town, calling at the top of her lungs: “Get inside! Whatever you do, don’t come out!” Since their erdgod was out of town, it fell to the deputy mayor to keep the people safe. “Nice sentiment, anyway,” Fiona muttered. In her right hand, she could feel the weight of the weapon she had grabbed as she left the mansion.

It was a Durandall. One of the god-slaying armaments Yukinari had made before he left. And he had indeed felled their previous erdgod with one of these; he hadn’t used his powers as an angel.

“But a weapon’s no good if you don’t know how to use it.”

Truth be told, Durandall was about as much use to Fiona as a good luck charm. Yukinari had technically taught her how to use the gun, and a bullet was already chambered, but she didn’t really believe she could wield the thing effectively.

“Lady Fiona!” Berta came running up behind her—holding, of course, another Durandall.

“Berta, you need to stay inside!”

“B-But…”

“Just do it!” And then Fiona was running again.

At the moment, the demigod was still obsessed with finding Yukinari, so it hadn’t tried to attack any of the townspeople yet. But demigods increased their power by eating people. This monster would think about that soon enough, and once the rampage began there would be no stopping it. She had to get as many people as possible indoors before that happened.

“Where iS HE?”

Suddenly, the demigod did something new. Perhaps incensed at Yukinari's failure to appear, it started rising into the sky.

Apparently, it was ready to start eating.

Thankfully, though, Fiona's shouting had had some effect; most of the townspeople had evacuated inside. The demigod could, of course, crash through the roofs of the buildings if it wanted to, but that would take some time. Perhaps enough for her to come up with an idea.

"Berta, get indoors! Anywhere!" As she shouted, Fiona let loose with Durandall. There was a roar, and the recoil made the gun jump in her hand. The bullet didn't hit the bird, of course, but the demigod changed course. It dug its claws into a building, tearing up a wall as it forcibly changed direction.

The demigod settled to the ground and looked at Fiona.

"so thAt's whERE yOu WErE!"

"...Huh?"

"i shAll PAy yOu bACK for tHE WoUNDS yoU gavE mE! FoR the Pain! ThE suFFERing!"

The gunshots seemed to have confused the demigod into thinking that Fiona was Yukinari. Setting aside the fact that she was a woman and he was a man, they also had completely different heights and faces... Maybe it was just as hard for the demigod to tell humans apart as it was for humans to tell at a glance which birds were male and which female, or what the subtle differences between their bodies were.

Fiona felt herself freeze. Until a moment ago, there had been a healthy distance between her and the demigod, and the creature hadn't been personally focused on her. So the fear hadn't hit her. But now... Now the demigod thought Fiona was the one it had come to eat. Its hatred was immediate and intense. Fiona had been able to ignore the fear until that moment, but now it grabbed her, threatening to strangle her from the inside out.

It's gonna eat me. No...

It was the most primal fear, the atavistic terror native to every living thing.

"nOW I shALl feAST!"

The demigod kicked the ground and flew at Fiona.

Distantly, she knew she had to get inside, but her body wouldn't move. The huge beak opened wide as if to swallow her whole.

"Lady Fiona!"

"Graaaaaaahhh!"

Berta's shout became one with—was that a roar?

The next second, Fiona was shoved to the side. "What...?" She blinked in confusion even as she tumbled to the ground. Thanks to the shove, she hadn't been eaten. But who had pushed her?

“Gwah?!” There was a screeching sound of impact, and a second later, someone else came flying to the ground beside Fiona. “Eeyow!” the figure cried. “That hurts! That is surpassingly painful!”

She realized, to her astonishment, that it was Arlen Lansdowne. He wasn’t wearing armor, but he was carrying a long cavalry spear, and at the moment he was rolling through the dirt, repeating, “Yow! Ouch!” He must have used the spear to deflect the blow from the demigod’s beak.

“Lansdowne?! Why in the world would you—”

“What are you just lying there for?!” Arlen shouted at her. He managed to stop exclaiming in pain long enough to jump up. “You really are an unutterable fool, aren’t you!”

“Who’s a fool?! Wait—where’d you get a weapon, anyway?!” The missionary knights of the True Church of Harris were supposed to be forbidden weapons, all of which had been locked up in the armory.

“Arnold broke into the armory and—but now’s not the time!” He grabbed Fiona’s hand. “You ran all over town getting everyone else inside, but you couldn’t take your own advice? Truly foolish!”

“H-How dare you…”

“Just get inside! You’re in the way!”

These words came not from Arlen, but from yet another voice. Fiona saw three more knights—without armor, but carrying swords and spears—trying to make a stand against the demigod. It must have been one of them who had shouted.

The demigod was truly massive, so large that even out on the main street, its movements were constrained by the buildings to either side. Its overwhelming size gave it a much greater range than the missionaries; their swords and spears would be of no real use. But they might be enough to buy some time.

“Lady Fiona!” Berta, who had already evacuated to a nearby building, leaned out and called to her. Fiona couldn’t yet make the strength come into her muscles, so Arlen half-carried, half-dragged her to where Berta was.

“Tell me why!”

“Why? Why what?”

“I mean, why did you help me?” It simply didn’t make sense to her.

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying, woman.” Arlen appeared to sincerely mean it. “We’re knights of the Missionary Order. Holy warriors charged with felling demons and bringing precious salvation to the unenlightened people of the frontier. When faced with a demon, we fight it. If there’s any chance, however small, that the people here, bumpkins though they are, might one day come to the teachings of the True Church, then it’s only natural that we would protect them. They can’t convert if they’re dead!”

“You……”

The words he spoke were arrogant and dismissive, utterly without regard for the people he was talking about—this was unmistakably the Arlen Lansdowne she knew. And yet...

“It’s our duty to destroy the demons in these remote regions. The ‘Blue Angel’ is one thing—but this is just a monster, and an ugly one at that. Why should we be afraid?”

And yet he was different, too. Somewhere between the time they had parted ways in the capital and the time they had met again in Friedland, he had become a knight.

●

Yukinari had his hands full just trying to cover Dasa. The “bullets” struck his armored body from all sides. They didn’t seem to have much penetrating power, but they came like a storm, keeping him pinned.

“What the...?!”

Because he was lying prone, trying to keep Dasa safe, it was hard to get a sense of what was going on. All he knew for sure was that this was some kind of attack by Yggdra.

Guns? Are they spraying bullets at me? How did an erdgod...

This world had had no concept of firearms until Yukinari brought it here. Even in the capital, which was relatively more advanced than the frontier regions, there were no explosives suitable for combat use. It was possible someone had thought of the idea of a gun, but as far as Yukinari knew, projectile weapons and artillery were represented, at best, by bows and arrows.

Or was there some genius in Rostruch who had invented this revolutionary weapon?

But I don’t hear any gunshots...

There had been plenty of noise when the bullets bounced off him, but no sound of a major explosion. So how on earth were they firing them? Pressurized gas, maybe. Springs. Or else...

“Hrk...”

His consciousness wavered with the next round of impacts. He had no idea how long his enemies’ ammunition might last, but he wasn’t going to get anywhere at this rate. If he got too dizzy, he might not even be able to protect Dasa.

“Dasa—”

“Yuki?”

“I’m going to make a shield. Stay hidden under it.”

“...Okay.”

Once he had Dasa’s agreement, Yukinari began the process of physical reconstitution. In this form as an armored knight, Yukinari could transform anything that was touching any part of his body. He broke down the earth

immediately beneath his knees and elbows, making a half-sphere-shaped shield to cover Dasa.

“There.” After he was sure the chrome molybdenum-steel blockade was in place, Yukinari rolled to one side and grabbed Durandall, which he had cast aside when he first threw himself on Dasa. He jumped up, then darted to the side again. He was banking on the hope that if his opponents were using anything like guns, they wouldn’t be able to aim as quickly as he could move.

But he was shocked as he realized, for the first time, what the “bullets” were that had struck him.

“Is this... a seed?”

Yes. A seed, fired with incredible force.

Flowers had grown up around him and Dasa, flowers so large they confused his sense of distance. They had shed their petals, launching their seeds from swollen fruits.

“Snapweeds?!”

Some flowers spread their seeds by firing them a great distance. Snapweeds are the major example, but several other such species have been confirmed—when the fruit ripens, the difference in cellular pressure inside and outside the skin of the fruit stores up energy, and needs only a slight stimulus to send the seeds flying. They’re essentially natural claymores.

Of course, normal snapweeds can’t cause injury with their seeds, but these plants, caused to grow very quickly by Yggdra, had exceptionally large seeds launched with immense power. They couldn’t get through Yukinari’s armor, but if a barrage of seeds, tens or hundreds of them, were to impact an unarmored person, they would quickly be reduced to a pile of bones.

“Damn overgrown weeds...!”

Yukinari rushed toward the “plant mines” and cut them down one by one. His enemies were not, it turned out, specifically targeting him, but were simply following the natural process for spreading their seeds, something they could only do once—so they had no way to respond to his assault.

But Ulrike waved her branch. “Know that your struggle is futile.” The next second, Yukinari found himself brought to a standstill by a root that burst through the ground and wrapped itself around his leg. More of the plant mines quickly came growing up, ten, then twenty of them surrounding him, ready to annihilate him with their seeds.

“Many a xenobeast and demigod has come to this land to challenge me, but none yet has made me their feast. Neither shall you be an exception, Godslayer. You shall die, and rot, and nourish me.”

Ulrike spoke without pride or ridicule; her tone was sober. No doubt this was how Yggdra’s rule had gone for centuries. As they had seen earlier, even if a xenobeast did manage to reach Yggdra’s body, there was simply

nothing it could do to a tree of this size. It would be captured, killed, and turned into nutrients.

“Hrrg…”

A fresh hail of bullets, even more potent than before, struck Yukinari. He used his powers to physically reconstitute the seeds as they slammed into him, but even so, his armor took the better part of the impact, which was transmitted to his body. He felt his “angel” body groaning with the repeated shocks.

“Yuki!” Dasa’s pained shout was accompanied by a gunshot. It had come from Red Chili, which was peeking out from under the shield. Despite being a pistol, the weapon was equipped with a scope for precise aiming, and that shot had been aimed at Ulrike.

Of course, the familiar was essentially a puppet of Yggdra, but it was likely to be she who was directing the aim of the plant mines. If she could be brought down, the attacks might stop, however temporarily—that was presumably Dasa’s thinking.

And indeed, the incoming fire did relent. But…

“I told you, your struggle is futile.”

The bullet had been stopped by a wall of tree roots that burst through the ground. At some point, other familiars had come to stand to either side of Ulrike. She wasn’t the erdgod’s only set of eyes. A plant like Yggdra probably had no blind spot. She could have dozens of eyes if she wanted. Her guard, like a plant’s, was never down. Meaning…

“Godslayer. Silver-haired girl. If you do not struggle, there will be no pain.”

“Shut up and take our divine punishment, huh? Just lie down and die?” Yukinari said, getting to his feet. “Is the big bad weed trying to show a little compassion? Well—”

Just for second, Ulrike cocked her head. She, or perhaps Yggdra, might have noticed something. Noticed that the earth beneath where Yukinari had been lying had changed color, in a wide circle about ten meters in diameter, centered on him. There had been black leaf mold there—and while it was still dark, the color seemed to have averaged out.

“You ever heard of black powder?”

“What?”

“Gotta be honest, this is actually the first time I’ve transmuted so much material. But you were kind enough to just keep shooting ‘ingredients’ at me.”

Nitroglycerin, nitrocellulose, and nitroguanidine. Yukinari had continually broken down the hail of seeds for information in order to produce these substances. And then he had reconstituted the ground directly beneath him.

It appeared to be a ten-meter-wide circle, but the smokeless gunpowder he’d produced went ten meters deep, too. He had essentially planted a gigantic bomb in Yggdra’s mountain.

“Get it yet?” Yukinari fired a single .44 Magnum bullet at Ulrike’s feet. “The logic is the same as that. But think of a scale tens of thousands—maybe millions—of times larger. Lots of noise, a huge shock, and fire. What do you think will happen to this mountain? I know living trees don’t burn easy, but you think you can stand up to a forest fire?”

Yukinari pointed Durandall at his feet.

Ulrike cast a silent, doubtful look at the Magnum bullet.

Yukinari didn’t know how well Yggdra understood things like gunpowder or explosions, but if the erdgod grasped that Yukinari held its life in his hands, that would be enough.

A new and heavy silence sat upon the field.

At length, Ulrike spoke, as though she had had her fill of the stillness. “Why do you not set fire to it, Godslayer?”

“Why do you think?”

Ulrike was quiet another moment, then said, “What are you? You are no human, yet neither are you any god. What are you?”

“You let those priests lead you by the nose—trees don’t even have noses! Godslayer this and Godslayer that. And *now* you want to know what I am?” There was venom in his words, but inwardly he sighed with relief. It looked like Yggdra was ready to talk.

“It’s true that I killed Friedland’s erdgod. It was just kind of the way things turned out—well, that thing took me for a sacrifice and was going to eat me.” Yukinari spared a glance at the dried-up xenobeasts littering Yggdra’s roots.

“The way things turned out…?”

“Yeah. It’s not my hobby to go around killing erdgods, or my job. I don’t know what the priests from Friedland told you, but... I didn’t come here to kill you. All I want is to establish trade between Rostruch and Friedland. My town lost the blessings of the land, and it’s my fault for killing that god. I thought maybe we could share some of Rostruch’s wealth.”

“...So you claim that you feel no hostility toward Rostruch, or me?”

“Yeah,” he said, but then he narrowed his eyes. “Yggdra, right? You’re cut from a different cloth than the erdgod I killed in Friedland. When we first got here, we saw a parade of sacrifices being brought out to you, so I thought maybe you were some human-eating monster, too…”

“I aver that I consume humans. Those citizens who are offered up to me become part of me,” Ulrike said calmly. The words didn’t seem to mean quite the same thing to Yggdra as they did to Yukinari. Perhaps it was because the erdgod was, ultimately, a plant that its perceptions were slightly askew to human thought.

“Right. And it seemed like bad news, but…” Yukinari thought of the sick man he’d met. “I saw that the people of Rostruch aren’t angry at being offered to you. They actually seem to think it’s a blessing. And those who become offerings are elderly people on the verge of death or the terminally

ill. For them, being offered to you must be a kind of salvation. What I'm saying is, things are very different here than in Friedland."

Ulrike was left silent.

"Look, here's the question I want to ask. Do you demand these sacrifices? Or do you just accept the dying people who are brought to you? How did you become an erdgod?"

Ulrike kept quiet a moment more, as though in thought.

"My beginning was with this Ulrike."

Ulrike—or rather, Yggdra, the erdgod to whom she was attached—slowly began to talk.

●

Erdgods, in essence, ruled over certain areas. They formed spiritual bonds with the land that allowed them to exert influence over it. Thus humans came to worship erdgods as beings with the ability to bestow abundance. And the erdgods, with their near-human intelligence, were able to respond to this worship.

But how, ultimately, was an erdgod born? Basically, erdgods possessed and were supported by a high spiritual level. This was the essence of what made them erdgods and unlike other living things. There was a simple way to obtain spiritual level and intelligence: get it from those who already had it. In other words, become a man-eater.

Eat a living human, imbibe the flesh and the soul that gave them their spiritual power and their intelligence. That was the easiest way of all. Thus, for erdgods and xenobeasts, eating humans was less a matter of sustenance than preference. A preference for becoming smarter and stronger.

But when an erdgod had been connected to the land for a very long time, although it would not age or weaken, its spiritual power and intelligence would begin to disperse into the earth. It would become less a living thing and more a feature of the land, like a mountain or river. Put another way, the whole place would become its body, and the erdgod's consciousness, spread too thin, would slip away.

Erdgods needed spiritual power and intelligence to prevent this from happening. The provision of living sacrifices was a systematic way of obtaining these elements through their contracts with humans.

Sometimes, however, an erdgod was capable of gaining what it needed from something other than humans. Say, demigods or xenobeasts that came into its territory, challenging the erdgod for its position. Then it would be not a man-eater, but a god-eater.

And sometimes, an erdgod might begin when, entirely by accident, a new bud found nutrients in a little girl, and over a vast span of years, became a huge tree and gained sentience.

"Ulrike and I were joined, and I gained intelligence and spiritual capacity. It of course took many long years before I was able to be completely unified with Ulrike."

And in an even greater happenstance, a nearby town—Rostruch, say—might have a tradition of taking the elderly and the ill who could no longer be cared for to the mountains, where they, too, nurtured this nameless tree, and so it quickly approached godhood.

And when this intelligent tree became known to the people of Rostruch, they asked it to become their erdgod. This tree already had great roots in the earth, its spreading branches already covered the creatures that crawled on the ground, and played nest to the birds that flew in the sky. What should it object to protecting humans as well?

Thus this anonymous tree was given the name Yggdra, and became the god that protected Rostruch.

As we've said, erdgods are prone to losing their intellects and spirits, and finally their sense of self. To prevent this, Yggdra accepted those Rostruch left on the mountain. Ultimately, Yggdra was able to use its roots to connect with the brains of Ulrike and the other familiars, and it was all because the erdgod felt no resentment and no revulsion at letting go of those who were near death.

No. The humanity that Yggdra used to speak through Ulrike was something it had gleaned from the sacrifices. A sacrifice was someone Yggdra could add to its collective intelligence, and there was no reason it should object to that.

"I think I get it, more or less," Yukinari said, raising one hand. The sacrificial systems of Rostruch and Friedland were fundamentally different, as he'd suspected. He couldn't entirely endorse the idea of offering up living people, no matter how short their time might be or how beyond help they were—but at least this wasn't a merciless enemy, an evil he had to destroy.

Yukinari had already dispersed his armor and returned to his usual appearance. They were just going to talk, and he knew Yggdra would be more receptive if he put down his weapons.

"So let me ask." He glanced at Dasa, who was keeping the hammer of Red Chili cocked. "Do you still see me as an enemy?"

But all the same, he kept his finger on Durandall's trigger. They were talking to an erdgod—a tree, at that. There was no telling how far human logic would go with it. He didn't want to let down his guard prematurely.

With all the gunpowder at his feet, mistakenly pulling that trigger would be suicide. Dasa was no doubt well aware of the same thing. It wouldn't necessarily ignite with a single shot, but if they started firing, it would have to be a very grave situation.

"You…" Ulrike cast her eyes at the ground as she spoke, as though she had just thought of something. "Before you thought of your own wounds, before you fought back against me, you protected that girl."

Behind her glasses, Dasa blinked. Perhaps she had been surprised by Ulrike's suddenly bringing her into the conversation.

"And you speak of the 'happiness' and 'salvation' of my offspring. And again, though you say you could burn me to ashes, you did not do so, but

first sought to talk. Your words and actions differ somewhat from those demigods and xenobeasts who come seeking only to slay me."

"...I guess so."

"I am prepared to recognize that you are not my enemy. I am not versed in the nuances of human interaction. I believe a moment like this may require an apology. Am I wrong?"

"...Erm, well, no, you're not."

Yukinari sighed. He was dealing with a god. A giant tree, at that. He didn't expect such a creature to talk quite normally, but Yggdra was being so roundabout that Yukinari couldn't tell how the erdgod really felt—or more to the point, whether it was safe to relax.

"At times like that, we just say 'Sorry.'"

"...'Sorry,'" Ulrike murmured, as though she were testing out a foreign word she'd heard for the first time. "'Sorry.' I recognize this word."

"Huh?"

"It is in Ulrike's memory. Yes... 'I am sorry.'"

Yggdra's oldest familiar stood muttering for a moment. Then, suddenly, she looked up and said, "Sorry! Bye!" And she laughed. Happily, like a little girl.

Yukinari was startled; it seemed she'd suddenly become a different person. But then she repeated, "Yes, sorry. Bye. I'm sorry," like a child happy to burble its first words.

"I sense it will be easiest to talk if you are 'closer' Ulrike, so this is how I shall proceed. You have no objection?"

As we've mentioned, Yggdra's consciousness seemed to be composed of the collective intelligence of those who had been sacrificed to her. In most cases, the erdgod seemed to work with an "average" of those intellects, but it seemed that, when the need arose, it could bring one particular personality to the fore.

Perhaps these facial expressions, this way of speaking, belonged to the girl Ulrike. She sounded strangely formal or elderly; was it simply because she was several centuries old, or was it the personality of some of the elderly sacrifices mingling with hers? Yukinari didn't know for certain, but it didn't matter.

"There's a lot of things I'd like to talk about now that we've cleared up our misunderstanding. That was what I came here for, anyway. I should probably talk to the mayor of Rostruch, but it looks like things would be simpler if I talked to you first. Is that all right?"

"If that shall pass for my apology, I shall certainly speak with you," Ulrike said with a nod.

Yukinari looked at both her and the massive tree that rose behind her, and then, sighing, held out his right hand. "I guess I can't really shake hands with Yggdra, so I'll shake with you, Ulrike."

"Hm...?"

"Here's to a bright future for us."

“Yes, a bright future, my small…” Ulrike cocked her head. “This is new. You are not my offspring. Nor my enemy. Nor a nutrient. What then are you to me?”

“How about we just say friend?”

“…Friend.”

Ulrike tried the word out with a blank look. After a moment, her face shone and she nodded several times.

"Friend. Friend. Yes, it had been so long, I'd nearly forgotten. Though it is within my familiars, it is a concept that I, Yggdra, do not have."

She still sounded old and formal, but Ulrike seemed to be genuinely pleased, and it made her look adorable.

"Let me speak anew, then. Here's to a brighter future, my small friend."

Ulrike took Yukinari's outstretched hand in her own tiny fingers. He thought her skin felt a bit cold—but soft.

●

The bizarre screech filled the sky above the town.

It was high-pitched, like a bird's cry—but it spoke human words. It had something of the quality of a ventriloquist's voice, and someone who didn't know better might have found it funny. But it belonged to a bird the size of a building, and there was nothing funny about it.

The birdlike demigod circled again and again in the sky over Friedland. It seemed to resent the pain Yukinari had caused it, and it had no intent of leaving until it found him. But Yukinari wasn't in Friedland at that moment.

They could try to explain this to the giant bird, but there was no telling whether the demigod would understand. After all, it didn't seem able to tell individual humans apart. It had even mistaken Fiona for Yukinari when she fired at it with Durandall.

The one silver lining was that this demigod seemed, surprisingly, to be weaker than it looked. Its size had suggested that it might just crush the human houses underfoot, but while it showed itself able to scatter some roof tiles and break some tree branches, it simply lacked the strength to destroy the sturdily built brick and stone houses. Perhaps it just had less body weight than first appeared—it was capable of flight, after all.

As long as everyone stayed inside, it didn't look like anyone was going to get eaten. But then again, as things stood, they were at an impasse.

It was always possible the demigod might get impatient and try to force its way into one of the buildings. Most demigods were composed of a living organism that made up their "core" or nucleus, along with a collection of other animals that had been attracted by the core's nascent divinity. These other animals were its familiars, and the spiritual link between all of them allowed them to act effectively as a single huge organism. By the same token, however, a demigod could release some of its familiars, on the understanding that it would lose some spirit and intelligence, in order to make itself smaller.

In other words, they couldn't just stay inside and wait for the threat to pass. They had to call Yukinari back. He was the only one who could fight the demigod.

"Well, gosh, that sounds useful!" Fiona was saying. "You couldn't have told me a little sooner?"

“Told you?” Arlen shot back. “Could you *be* any more selfish and arbitrary? As I recall, it was you and the Blue Angel who took all our tools from us to begin with!”

“Lady Fiona, Mr. Lansdowne… You’re both making a bit of a racket…”

The two stopped their bickering. Fiona was leading Berta and Arlen toward the town’s communal storehouse, moving from shadow to shadow so as not to be noticed by the demigod.

The storehouse had been built to hold the village’s crops and everything else they had in common, as well as goods that were bought in bulk from visiting merchants. It had plenty of space, so the weapons and equipment that had been confiscated from the missionary knights had been stored there as well. And according to Arlen, that equipment included something that would allow them to contact Yukinari.

Its original purpose had been to allow communications between the capital and units of the Missionary Order that had been sent to remote regions. In the past, messenger birds had been often used for this purpose, but a bird could always find itself picked off by a predator, including xenobeasts or demigods. So the birds had largely been replaced…

“Okay… We’re here,” Fiona said, leading them up to a back entrance. As soon as they were inside—meaning under a roof and away from immediate danger of being attacked by the demigod—Arlen stretched out his back and took on the haughty attitude Fiona knew so well.

“All right, start looking! We don’t have any time to lose! It’s a wooden box, about yea big, with red and white lettering on the side and—”

“Don’t you order us around!” Fiona said. “Anyway, you’re the one who should be looking!”

“I’ll be trying to find a vial of holy oil!”

They took up shouting at each other as they searched.

“Haven’t you already been in here? When you broke in to steal the weapons and armor?” She was referring to the weapon he had wielded during the fight with the demigod, one of the arms the knights had brought with them when they came to Friedland.

“I told you, Arnold and his sympathizer Bartok did that on their own—we just made use of what they left behind… Those weapons belonged to us in the first place, anyway! What’s wrong with taking back what’s already ours?!”

“You had to give them to Yukinari after he beat you, so they aren’t yours anymore!”

“U-Um, Lady Fiona…”

“What?!”

“I think I found it…” Berta pointed hesitantly to a box that looked just like Arlen had described: made of wood, with the name of the Harris Church written in red and white letters on the side along with the inscription “Messenger Bird.”

“This is it, right?” she asked.

“Right. A mechanical bird—just like the guardian saint, a product of the Church’s unparalleled craftsmen. It’s beyond even the imagining of you country rubes, moving with the help of the Church’s miraculous holy oil—”

“Why do you always have to be so high and mighty?” Fiona demanded, even as she opened the box. And indeed, inside rested a metal bird with a body of struts and cogs, and wings that seemed real. She took it gently in hand; it was lighter than it looked.

“Is this how you control it?” Several tuning forks were in the box with the bird.

“Don’t touch it!” Arlen exclaimed. “It’s delicate!” He grabbed the messenger bird from Fiona.

It appeared the device was controlled through the use of notes, and by attaching small vials of holy oil, one could determine the melody and create a series of actions for the bird to execute. In that respect, it was much the same as the statue of the guardian saint.

“Okay, Schillings, come here.” Arlen finished fiddling with the device and beckoned to Fiona.

“Well, do you want me not to touch it or do you want me to come help you?”

“I *don’t* want you to touch it. But with this messenger bird, you don’t write your message—you use your voice. You tell it your message, then it’ll go to its destination and repeat it.”

“You use your voice…?”

“Yes. Call the Blue Angel with your voice. It repeats a woman’s voice better. But it can’t remember much, so keep it simple.”

After a long pause, Fiona said, “Okay.” Arlen held the artificial bird out toward her, and Fiona spent a moment collecting her thoughts, deciding what to say. Then she took a deep breath.

●

Riding on Sleipnir, which had been returned to them, Yukinari and Dasa came back to the village of Rostruch—and to their surprise, found the townspeople greeting them *en masse*, heads bowed respectfully.

“I let them know that our misunderstanding has been resolved,” Ulrike, who had come with them, said with a hint of pride. Apparently, another familiar had been sent to the town to let everyone know that Yukinari and Dasa were not enemies of Yggdra, or of Rostruch.

The familiars acted as Yggdra’s intermediaries, and the erdgod was able to communicate with them from quite a distance. Because the people offered up as living sacrifices became familiars, there was no need for priests to mediate between the people and the god. If anything, the familiars filled that role.

If nothing else, it was certainly nice that the message had spread so quickly.

Yukinari and the others were shown directly to the mayor’s residence and taken to something like a parlor. Yukinari would be explaining for the

second time why he had come to Rostruch. If he hadn't run into the priests, they could have had this conversation long ago.

"Trade, you say?" the mayor asked, looking a bit surprised.

He was a short but broad-shouldered man just entering old age. His square jaw and large nose stood out in an honest-looking face; he seemed like someone who might have been more comfortable hoeing a field than sitting at a desk doing government work.

"It's true that Rostruch is rather rich in crops," he said, "but... We've had very little contact with the outside world. Forgive me for being blunt, but I'm not sure we have much to gain by trade."

"I see..."

Certainly, Rostruch, which had the air of a hidden village, looked largely self-sufficient. This was part of what had contributed to its unique culture: not just people's dress, but the architecture and even the religious rituals.

"I haven't seen the whole town, so I can't say for sure," Yukinari said, watching the mayor closely. "But do you have enough medicine? Are there any doctors here?"

"I'm sorry...?"

"It looks like you guys mostly have traditional treatments..."

Medical science didn't seem to have developed very far in Rostruch. The man they'd met in the seemingly abandoned building had gone blind because of an illness, and it wasn't clear if it could have been prevented.

For example, there's something called *nyctalopia*, or "night blindness," which was known as far back as the Edo period in Japan. It's a condition of the eyes in which vision is more limited than it should be in dark places. Most people's eyes can get used to the dark, but those with night blindness are unable to do so.

Night blindness was supposed to be caused by a vitamin A deficiency. Folk wisdom in the Edo era held that one could stave off night blindness by eating eel, a common food in Japan and one rich in vitamin A. Did Rostruch have the same kind of knowledge?

This wasn't the only such connection that could be made. It's common for deficiencies in diet to develop in isolated societies. The result is illnesses relatively unique to that society, some of which can be fatal. A lack of vitamin A, for example, can lead not just to night blindness, but can stunt children's growth and produce learning disabilities.

Of course, such problems can be resolved through long years of trial and error. But for better and for worse, Rostruch had the system of living sacrifices to provide relief. It was possible the people of the town had never developed the technologies that might allow them to cling to life.

And another thing...

"When someone is slowly wasting away, that's one thing. But what about major, sudden injuries, like from a severe accident, or a fast-moving illness? Say the person won't even last three days. Are there cases like that, where they aren't in time to receive Yggdra's salvation?"

“Well…” The mayor looked troubled. It seemed Yukinari was on the mark.

“Dasa was born blind,” Yukinari said, indicating the girl sitting beside him.

This seemed to take both Ulrike and the mayor by surprise.

“…What?”

“But that girl…”

“Yeah. She can see now. I cured her.”

The mayor went silent, studying Dasa. She must have found it a bit awkward, because she turned her head aside ever so slightly and pulled close to Yukinari.

“Now, I can’t cure everything, of course. But this isn’t just about medical science. You guys seem very ready to give up on people here. Maybe we’ve figured out how to solve that in Friedland. I’ll bet if we looked, we could find meaningful knowledge and products that we could exchange.”

He saw almost no tools made of metal in Rostruch. It was always possible that they were using stone tools, not even bronze ones. Metal objects might be very pricey. But for medicine, metal items would be indispensable: tools capable of delicate work, not liable to change shape or lose their edge in humidity or heat. They might not be dealing with surgical scalpels, but even suturing a wound required a needle.

“It’s possible…”

“I know people near death here consider it a joy and an honor to be offered to Yggdra. But if they could live instead, wouldn’t that be even better? And some people endure non-fatal illnesses and injuries. There’s a chance we could help them, too.”

The mayor said nothing, but looked to Ulrike as if to discover what Yggdra thought about this. But the familiar showed no particular reaction. The mayor sighed and said, “I grant that your suggestion is attractive in some ways. But if we do what you’re saying, then… Lord Yggdra’s power…”

He stumbled over his words a bit, but he was right. If the erdgod didn’t keep up its spiritual power and intelligence in some way, its consciousness would gradually spread thin and meld into the surrounding environment. Rostruch’s tradition of giving up its old and weak was not just a way of avoiding trouble, nor was it merely a useless superstition.

Ulrike, who had been silent, opened her mouth. “As to that point, though I know not precisely to what extent, I can maintain myself by eating captured xenobeasts and demigods.”

“But... Lord Yggdra…” The mayor looked distraught; no doubt he thought this wouldn’t be enough to support the erdgod.

Yggdra was a massive plant, and its influence was strong and wide-ranging. Its consciousness might thin out quicker than that of other erdgods.

“When Ulrike and I were first connected,” Ulrike began with a certain seriousness, “her head was full of the wish to see her mother or her father,

and how lonely she was without them. She had come to the mountains in the first place because she wished to feed them mushroom soup. Before, when I was only a tree, I did not understand such feelings. But after watching over you, my offspring, for so long, and after being offered many sacrifices, I believe I understand, roughly."

She gave a gentle smile. She looked like such a young girl, but the smile was almost like that of a mother. "If there is a way for you to survive, try it. The desire to avoid death is common to all living things—to the beasts and the birds, yes, even the grass and the trees. There is no need to defy your own emotions out of consideration for me. When one of you feels they have had their fill of life, then let them come to me."

Ulrike stretched slightly to pat the mayor on the head. The impression was of a ten-year-old girl comforting her father, or even grandfather, and watching the scene, it was strangely difficult not to smile.

"Lord Yggdra..."

"On that note," Yukinari said, glancing at Dasa, "it's possible you might not need living sacrifices at all."

"...What do you speak of?"

It was Dasa who answered. "Holy... oil. What the Harris Church... uses... for their 'miracles.'"

"Miracles...?"

"A liquid... produced by alchemy. It can store up heat and power. Including spiritual power. At least... that was its original... purpose."

Dasa, who had been an assistant to her alchemist sister despite being blind, was in a better position than Yukinari to offer a simple and accurate explanation of this subject.

"At the Great... Cathedral of the True Church of Harris, they circulate... holy oil to capture the spiritual power of the... believers' prayers. The oil can also be used... to perform various 'miracles.'"

To the average believer, who knew nothing of any of this, it seemed miraculous that something like the statue of the guardian saint could move. And it was furthermore amazing that the devices were driven by a red liquid that looked like blood.

"Demigods and xenobeasts want to eat humans... eat their brains... because of the wealth of spiritual power there. Spiritual power is the basis of intelligence, and humans have more of it than any other creature. Call us the top of the spiritual food chain. By... using the medium of prayer to gather spiritual power from people, and... holy oil to hold it, it's possible to store up... spiritual power for use at another time..."

Suddenly, Dasa stopped, blinking as if she had just realized something. "...You understand?"

"Eh, more or less," Yukinari said with a half-smile. He glanced at the mayor and Ulrike—or rather, Yggdra—who both nodded.

The mayor said, "So... Instead of offering living sacrifices, we could offer our prayers, and then use the holy oil..."

“As a substitute, yes.” Dasa nodded. “As long as we have the ingredients, I can make… holy oil. Yuki can… too. We can also teach… anyone who wants to learn. Though we’ll need… tools.”

The mayor made a sound of wonder.

Tradition is an important link between the present and the past, but keeping to it too slavishly can prevent the introduction of new ideas. Because the system of living sacrifices had never been a real issue over the course of hundreds of years, the people of Rostruch had never considered replacing it with something else.

“We’re not saying you need to change everything right away,” Yukinari said, feeling relieved that things seemed to be going well. “But it might be good to have some options available.”

What types of goods the two towns might trade, including holy oil, was something they would have to work out in more detail. But since Rostruch seemed open to the idea, Friedland stood to become a more prosperous place. Then, maybe the Friedlanders would feel they had enough excess to support the children at the orphanage.

“Now that I think of it,” Ulrike said, “there were those priests and knights from Friedland…”

“…Er…” Yukinari and Dasa were suddenly reminded of the people who had gotten them into this mess to begin with.

“The question remains of what to do with them,” the familiar said. “There is no doubt they deceived me. But they came to Rostruch despite attacks by xenobeasts that ate several of their companions. They must have had a reason for doing so. I cannot say they deserve death, but neither can they be left alone.”

“I suspect—”

Yukinari was about to explain what he thought they were there for when they were interrupted by a sound as loud as thunder:

Yuuuukiiiinaaaaaaariiiiii!

They all jumped at the noise, which called Yukinari’s name from directly overhead.

Heeeellllllllpppp uuuuuusssss!

“Wh-What the hell?!”

“A sound from outside, it would seem.”

“I think it came from over here.” The mayor walked to the window and opened the shutter. Yukinari and Dasa thanked him, then rushed over to look out.

“Yuki, there.” Dasa pointed to the sky. Something white flew through the cloudless blue. It was flapping its wings like a bird, but he had never heard of a bird that could shout “Yukinari, help us!” loudly enough to be heard all

over Rostruch. And although the voice had been somewhat distorted—by the volume or the altitude, he wasn't sure—it had sounded an awful lot like Fiona's.

The bird, or whatever it was, circled in the sky over the town, repeating "Yukinari"—"help us"—"the demigod from earlier..."

"The demigod? No way..."

She couldn't mean the four-winged monster. Yukinari had left it on the brink of death, but just as Dasa had said, it didn't seem to have left any particular impression in that bird-like head. Or maybe it wanted revenge, or a rematch with Yukinari. Whatever the reason, it had attacked Friedland.

He didn't know how quickly the birdlike object could fly, but it was unlikely that it could transport itself instantaneously from Friedland to Rostruch. That meant a fair amount of time had probably passed since the town had been attacked.

"Right when I leave for a few days...!"

He'd left three Durandalls and about a hundred bullets behind, and while that might have been one thing against a normal land-bound demigod, the short-range pistol rounds Durandall used would be much harder to aim at an enemy that could fly in the sky. All the worse if the person with the gun wasn't used to shooting. Meaning...

"Damn! It'll take at least half a day to get back, even on Sleipnir!"

Who knew if Fiona and the others could hold out that long? In the worst-case scenario, it was even possible the demigod had already wreaked havoc on Friedland. People might be dead—dozens, hundreds.

"We've got to get home as quick as we can," Yukinari said, his voice starting to strain with panic. He was about to dash from the mayor's house when someone took his hand.

"Ulrike...?" It was Yggdra's familiar who had reached out to him.

"I do not understand exactly what's going on, but I gather you must return to Friedland with haste, correct?"

"Yeah, I—"

"Then I may be able to lend you my aid."

"Huh...?" Yukinari furrowed his brow.

What could Ulrike—no, Yggdra—do to help him get back to Friedland faster? Yggdra was a giant tree who couldn't go anywhere at any speed. And while Ulrike and the other familiars had stupendous mobility, that was all they had.

"Come," Ulrike said. "I shall explain on the way."

●

Seeing the thing up close brought home how absurdly large it was. Yggdra was a gigantic tree, and her control extended to almost all the vegetation in the area. If necessary, she could even accelerate the breakdown of cells in order to rebuild plants in another place or in the required shape.

Perhaps what was happening now was an application of that ability.

Two huge trees—smaller than Yggdra, but appearing centuries old nonetheless—shot out thick branches from which dangled a vine large enough to be a rope. And on that rope—no, that vine—all the familiars were pulling.

The familiars had human form, but their strength exceeded that of a person. It was a wonder the branches supporting the vine didn't break; the vine itself could be heard creaking. It was basically…

"A slingshot? No, more like a bow…"

Even Yukinari was wide-eyed. The apparatus was like a bow, but dozens of times the size of any bow any human had ever used.

"Yes," said Ulrike, "so it is. But it does not shoot arrows."

"You mean to launch me out of this thing all the way back to Friedland."

"I do." She nodded and smiled. She had the look of a child who had thought up a fun prank—and in fact, if Yggdra was to be believed, this might really be the personality of the girl Ulrike showing through.

"You've gotta be nuts…"

"This from the man who thought he would simply blow away a mountain."

"Well, you've got me there."

Yukinari had already turned the gunpowder under Yggdra's mountain back into earth. Although given how damp the area was, it probably wouldn't have exploded even if he'd just left it there.

"The form you assumed in our battle—it had a beautiful set of wings. I don't suppose they're only for decoration?"

"I don't know if I'd call them decoration, but they're not exactly made for flapping…"

The real purpose of the wings was to help disperse the huge amounts of waste heat that could quickly be generated by physical reconstitution. This was why everything around Yukinari seemed to be enveloped in a haze when he assumed the form of the Bluesteel Blasphemer.

"But you can move them of your own volition." For gliding, at least, they would probably fit the bill. "That is all you need do. Now, then—Yukinari."

Ulrike indicated the vine that the other familiars were pulling on. To his surprise, Yukinari saw that the half-globe he had created to protect Dasa was already attached to it. That was what they would use to hold him.

"Young girl. Dasa, is it not?" Ulrike, who herself looked hardly older than ten, turned to Dasa, who stood beside Yukinari. "You should remain here. This will prove dangerous for a normal person."

"I… won't," she replied immediately. This response seemed to flummox even Ulrike.

"H-Hang on a second, Dasa. I know how you feel, but—"

"Yuki." Dasa held fast to his sleeve and shook her head. "I won't let you… go alone."

"But—"

"I'm on your… side, remember."

Yukinari said nothing.

“I’ll always be… with you.” And then she stretched out her hand and touched his cheek. “I’ll go… anywhere with you. Otherwise, I… can’t be there for you, Yuki.”

“……All right.” He heaved a sigh, gave a small shrug. “She can be pretty stubborn. And I don’t have time to try to talk her out of it right now. I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens—so send the two of us together.”

“So I shall. Only be careful not to drop your cherished ally.”

“Sure thing.”

Ulrike nodded, and Yukinari focused his consciousness. A bluish-white light enveloped him, melding with the black that rose up to cover him. Soon his body was encased in blue and black armor, and then his wings emerged, looking like they were made of pieces of glass.

“Here goes.” Yukinari took Dasa in his arms and then climbed into the half-globe. Dasa, for her part, wrapped her arms around his neck. And then…

“Fire.”

There was no countdown, just that single word. The next instant, the familiars let go all at once, the vine propelling Yukinari and Dasa into the air with tremendous force.

Yukinari’s vision dimmed, presumably the result of all the fluids in his body—especially his head—being forced into his lower body by the acceleration. He was blacking out—or in this case, graying out. It was the sort of thing fighter pilots experienced at 3 or 4 g.

“Hrgg… gg…” In his arms, Dasa groaned with the pain of it. He couldn’t blame her—Dasa had never so much as ridden in an airplane, let alone been flung through the sky. They had no windscreen, and in fact, they were very lucky they hadn’t fainted clean away.

It’s all right. We’re all right…

He couldn’t say the words as they flew, so he hugged Dasa tighter instead.

And then, when he judged they had gone as high as they could, Yukinari spread his angel wings. Man-made wings that sparkled in the sunlight as he drifted on the wind. He and Dasa danced through the air; they could see everything spread out below them. Yukinari caught a tailwind and steered them toward Friedland. He did everything he could to control their descent, his wings jingling and groaning.

“…We’re going to make it.” He hugged Dasa tighter still as the conviction welled up within him. The Bluesteel Blasphemer glided through the sky, heading for where Friedland waited to be rescued.

●

There was a screech, and the wall of the building caved in. The birdlike demigod had finally gotten tired of waiting. Enraged at being unable to find Yukinari, it began attacking any structure within reach.

As strong as it was, its birdlike body was light, meaning the demigod didn't have the power to destroy the sturdy brick and stone buildings. But wooden doors and shutters were vulnerable, especially around their hinges. The demigod seemed to have figured this out.

It stuck its head into a broken window. "Brains! GIVE ME your brains! I shall eAt thEM, and grOw stroNger...!"

The townspeople had followed Fiona's evacuation order. They'd thought they were safe inside the buildings. Now they screamed and fled to inner rooms. The giant beak pecked away, seeming large enough to swallow a child whole, and all anyone could do was tremble at the sparks.

And then...

"Brains! Braaains, slurp slurp! EaT ThEM, groW smaRTer...!"

Suddenly, the silhouette of the face in the window seemed to shudder, and then several more monstrous birds, considerably smaller than the demigod, sprang from its head. They ranged from hawks and falcons, large birds of prey, to smaller avians—with a shiver, they separated from the demigod's head and entered the room.

Familiars.

A demigod's body was formed from a core whose divinity attracted other creatures, which then became spiritually bound to it. It was like a whole flock moving as a single organism. If it wanted, the demigod could command its familiars as if they were arms or legs.

In a panic, the townspeople tried to shut their doors and go farther into their houses, but even interiors were no longer really safe. Houses or shops with basements might still manage, but hiding in a wooden shed would be no use. Not with the demigod breaking off pieces of itself, sending its familiars through doors and windows and cracks in walls.

"Over here...!"

Berta had been slow to run. Or more precisely, she had been gathering up the orphans, who had been wandering around with no idea where to go, and now they were crouching in a half-wrecked shed. It was only a matter of time.

Just across the way, she could see a tough-looking brick storehouse. On the floor just past the entrance was a way into the basement. If they could just get over there, they would be saved—probably. But she could also see the demigod's familiars coming toward them.

By herself, she might have made it, but running with two or three of her "little sisters" in tow would be impossible.

"Big Sis Berta, I'm so scared..."

She patted the little girl who clung to her on the back. "It's all right. I'll stay with you."

"Are we going to be eaten? Is that bird gonna eat us?"

"That's not the honored erdgod, is it?"

Berta bit her lip. The girls at the orphanage had been indoctrinated by the priests to believe that being offered to the erdgod was an honor, so they

had comparatively little fear of being eaten by the deity. But by the same token, this meant that if some other creature got to them first, it could undo their whole reason for living.

“Big Sis Berta...”

The time for assurances had passed. The demigod and its familiars would notice them soon. Berta had fled here in such a hurry that she had left behind the Durandall Yukinari had given her. Not that she would have really known how to use it if she’d had it.

In the end, she was just a helpless little girl. Still no use to anyone. Still not fit for anything but to be eaten by a god.

In that case...

“Listen.” Berta pried the girls off her one by one and looked each of them in the face. “You see the brick building over there? When I say ‘run,’ you run to it as fast as you can. There’s a big square door just inside, kind of a lid. Open it, and go in. If you fall, don’t cry, just get up and keep running. You understand? Can you do that?”

None of the girls said anything, but as Berta looked at each of them, they nodded at her with fearful faces.

“Okay, then. Here we go.”

Berta stepped away from her little sisters and looked down the street from the shadows of the rubble. There was the demigod, many of its familiars alongside, heading right for them.

“Run!”

As she shouted the order, Berta began walking toward the demigod and its pack of familiars. She held her arms out so they could see her clearly, as if to say, *Here I am!*

If she deliberately went to the demigod, it would eat her first; that would buy them some time.

Or so she’d thought.

To Berta’s astonishment, several of the familiars flew past her at high speed.

“Wait! Huh...?”

Before she could stop herself, Berta spun around to see where the creatures were going, and she realized her own stupidity.

The girls were running, just as she’d told them to do. One fell down, but instead of crying, she got up again. But the motion had actually drawn the attention of the sharp-eyed demigod and its familiars.

Birds can catch bugs in their beaks in midair, or pick out prey on the ground while flying at high speed. When it comes to spotting moving objects, their vision is vastly superior to a human’s. If something attempts to run away, a bird will go for it almost instinctively.

“No...! Stop...!”

Several of the familiars were homing in on the girl who had fallen. Even at a run, Berta wouldn’t reach her in time.

At the same moment, she heard the demigod screeching behind her. “Grey matter! I shAll sip sip sip iT!”

The whole area was thrown into shadow. She realized she was directly beneath the demigod.

There was no hope anymore. Not for her sisters. Not for her.

But just as Berta was about to give in to despair…

A gunshot.

“You moron! Run already!”

There was Fiona, leaning halfway out of the open door of the storehouse, brandishing Durandall.

Of course, she had had no more training with the weapon than Berta; her chances of hitting the flying demigod or its familiars were vanishingly small. Fiona worked the lever and fired again, but there was no sign that she’d hit anything.

“Screee?!”

“Gyaaa!”

But the quailing of the familiars was obvious even to Berta. They remembered. They remembered the pain Yukinari’s gun had inflicted on them when they had been part of the demigod’s body. The familiars knew that when the humans used that thunderclap-loud device, they could be hurt.

And then—

“You all truly are useless, aren’t you!”

To Berta’s surprise, Arlen came jumping out past Fiona. He wore no armor and carried no spear, but instead he, too, had a Durandall in hand. He dashed for Berta’s little sisters.

“You little country shits are trouble! Did you even think about what would happen when you ran out here?!”

Berta watched, amazed, as he all but flung them into the storehouse. He didn’t exactly throw them so much as sort of slide them, but what Berta saw was her little sisters giving a shout as they bounced once and then rolled into the storehouse.

Knights were used to wearing full body armor and carrying long spears and heavy shields; it wasn’t a difficult matter for one of them to pitch a few undernourished little girls into a doorway.

“I, Arlen Lansdowne, a knight of the Missionary Order, will be more than a match for some familiars!”

He leaped at the enemies, using Durandall to cut them down. “Don’t just stand there, girl!” he shouted. “Run!”

“Berta!”

Arlen’s and Fiona’s voices brought her back to herself.

“Brains!”

But as she made to run, Berta was thrown to the ground by a powerful gust of wind that struck her on the back. The demigod above must have given one great flap of its wings.

“Ow...”

She landed faceup, staring into the sky. A massive body hung above her, like a lid over the heavens. Slowly, so slowly, it descended. Several familiars surrounded it. The massive talons that were its weapons stretched toward Berta’s head...

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The next second, Berta couldn’t see the demigod anymore. A trailing scream cast it out of the way.

“...Huh?” she asked dumbly.

It wasn’t only the demigod she’d lost track of; its familiars were also flopping around on the ground. Perhaps things that happened to the main body had an effect on the familiars as well.

The demigod let out a bellow of rage. “Graaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!” It tumbled through the air as if it had been struck with a giant steel staff, colliding with a nearby building. The demigod wobbled back through the sky, shedding feathers, blood, and the bodies of destroyed familiars.

“L... Lord Y-Yukinari...?”

She could see him on the demigod’s back. A weird knight in blue and black armor, with wings of dark crystal.

The one she worshipped. Friedland’s protector god.

“The Blue Angel...!”

“Yukinari!”

Arlen and Fiona sounded as surprised as Berta.

They could make out Dasa up there with Yukinari atop the demigod. The two of them had something like a dark-gray rope, which they had wrapped around the demigod’s huge body and were twisting tight.

“Graaaaahhhhhh!”

The demigod struggled, trying to throw off Yukinari and Dasa, but they held tight to the rope and were never in danger of falling off. Instead, there was another roar from their guns, and more blood and feathers and familiars fell from the monster.

“Lord Yukinari is—!”

“The honored erdgod has returned!”

Perhaps drawn by the demigod’s scream, people were looking out from doors and windows. Several missionaries also appeared, weapons in hand. They had known they couldn’t stand against the demigod, but the familiars that came plummeting down? Those they could handle.

“Stay alert, one blow could be the end of you!”

“As if a few familiars could—!”

The knights had come to Friedland as invaders, but just as Arlen had said, they were always enemies of erdgods, demigods, and xenobeasts. The people of Friedland were potential converts, future believers. It was practically the knights' duty to fight in this battle.

"Lord Yukinari...!"

Berta sat up, looking at the savior who had single-handedly turned the tide. How many times had he now saved her when she had been on the cusp of death?

"Oh..."

How foolish she was. She belonged to Yukinari, and yet she had been about to offer herself up to the demigod of her own volition. Yes, she had been trying to save her little sisters from the orphanage. But didn't it also show her failure to trust Yukinari? She should have had faith, to the last moment, that he would arrive and save them. She was his, a shrine maiden whose first duty was to serve him.

"My... Our... god."

A fate too awful for humans to bear is called despair. And one who can lift humans out of despair, they call a god.

Hope is the light that cuts through the frozen darkness of wretchedness.

The black and blue armor, almost dizzying to behold, looked to Berta like the shining of hope itself.

●

"You sonuva—!" Yukinari pulled hard on the wire as he fired Durandall. "This time I'm gonna turn you into roast chicken for real, so just—die—already!"

But the unsteady footing meant his bullets had no hope of reaching the core, the kill shot. Yukinari, still holding Dasa under his left arm, bounced on the demigod's back like he was at some sort of otherworldly rodeo.

"Dasa, are you okay?"

"I'm o...kay...!"

After Yggdra had launched them into the air, they'd flown clear to Friedland, where Yukinari had spotted the demigod attacking the town and delivered a body blow on the way down. Once it had figured out that it only needed two wings to control its position in the air, the demigod seemed to get distracted by something on the ground.

Yukinari also succeeded at using physical reconstitution to create the metal wire. But that was when the problems started.

"Where's its core? It's not in its head...!"

During their previous battle, Yukinari had worked on the assumption that the core was located in the demigod's head, but that had clearly been a mistake. That was how the creature had escaped right when he'd thought it was dead.

The demigod was also unmistakably larger than before. Presumably, after it had fled, it had attacked humans, or at least other demigods and xenobeasts, increasing its spiritual power and attracting more birds and

animals as familiars. It was possible that someone somewhere had become its victim, all because Yukinari failed to finish it off last time.

All the more reason to find the core now.

But where was it? Even Durandall lacked the power to pierce all the way through the massive body, and a “cannon” like the one he had used against the statue of the guardian saint would be for nothing if he mistook the location of the crucial shot. He didn’t have it in him to make more than one of something that large in quick succession.

“Maybe I could use physical reconstitution to break up its body a bit?”

“Yuki—don’t get distracted,” Dasa said, firing Red Chili repeatedly from where he held her under his arm. Her shots took down a familiar that had detached itself from the demigod’s body and tried to attack them.

“I know that!” He used Durandall to cut down an attacker here, shoot one there. But he still couldn’t figure out where his real goal, the core, was. Of course, it wasn’t impossible to just go on chipping away at the demigod’s body like this...

“Gyyyahhhh!”

The monster howled with frustration. It seemed to be starting to panic at its inability to shake off its tormentors.

“YoU! yOu! ImpERTinenT earth-CrawlErs!”

“Strong words from a birdbrain like you,” Yukinari said, giving the wire another tug. “You lost the minute we got this wire on you. You can’t fly away, and with your body, you can’t exactly reach up to scratch where it itches, can you? You’ll never get rid of us.”

“Graahh...” The demigod gave a low moan, and in the next instant:

“YOU daMNable fools!!”

The wire sank deep into the massive body. It hadn’t bitten into the flesh—it was being passed through.

“Yuki...!”

Yukinari didn’t reply; he and Dasa were thrown through the air.

The demigod had been able to pass the wire through its body by temporarily detaching familiars from itself and turning them back into a flock of birds. Perhaps it had gotten the idea when Yukinari had said “get rid of us.” Whatever bizarre forms they might take, gods were gods; they were more intelligent than regular birds and animals.

“Fall To Your Doom!” the demigod—or rather, the flock of strange birds—cackled in midair.

It was only an instant later that a gunshot rang out in the direction of the flock.

“I knew you were a birdbrain,” Yukinari laughed as he plummeted down. “Revealing your own weak point!”

Shocked, the demigod rushed to recompose itself, but Dasa fired one round after another from Red Chili, taking down members of its flock. Finally, the core in the center of the great mass was visible. Yukinari pointed Durandall at it, and the weapon belched flame.

“Graaahh…!”

The core bird took a direct hit from a .44 Magnum bullet and plunged out of the sky.

“Hrk!”

In contrast, Yukinari opened his wings to blunt the speed of their descent. Even with Dasa in his arms, he somehow managed to land on his feet. The impact produced a crater almost two meters deep, but miraculously didn’t break his legs.

“…Gah!” he gasped. “Ten meters is a long drop, even with a reinforced body.” He let Dasa down and rose up.

He had used his wings to kill their downward velocity, but of course, this was only possible because he was in the form of the Bluesteel Blasphemer. If this had happened to any normal person, even if they had managed to land on their feet, every bone in their lower body would have been instantly vaporized.

“Graahh…”

A lone crow lay on the ground just in front of Yukinari. This must have been the core of that demigod. It looked basically like any other crow, but its eyes were too large, more like those of a human, and its beak looked almost like a pair of lips. Its head was a disturbing shape, like a half-formed human cranium.

“Here I thought you’d be a bird of prey,” Yukinari said, hefting Durandall. “But you’re just some crow. Enjoyed yourself in my garden? Well, the fun’s over now.”

“Grah!”

The first gunshot had entirely broken its spiritual connection with its familiars—all the other birds had returned to their normal bodies and scattered, making no effort to protect the core.

“See you in hell,” Yukinari said, and pulled the trigger.

Explosive gases propelled the bullet—a soft-point hunting round—down the barrel. The .44 Magnum round entered the body of the bizarre bird faster than the speed of sound, and all that kinetic energy had nowhere to go but through the creature’s flesh. The core was sent flying, torn clean in two, leaving only a cloud of black feathers.

“They say crows are smart,” Yukinari muttered, “but I guess when they get too smart, they turn ugly.” Then he and Dasa looked over their shoulders.

Berta and Fiona had come running up and were there. Behind them, the townspeople were looking at Yukinari in a sort of befuddled astonishment. He saw Arlen and some of the other knights, too, carrying weapons.

As far as he could see, there were no dead townspeople around. Small blessings.

“Oh…!”

“Lord Yukinari…”

Some who saw him fell to their knees in prayer. Others raised shouts of acclamation. Still others simply wept to know they were alive. Everyone had a different reaction.

“I… I guess we made it in time, huh?”

“…Mn.”

That single syllable, a sigh, and a nod were Dasa’s answer.

Chapter Four: The One Sent by a God

Three days after the attack by the flying demigod, Friedland had a visitor from Rostruch.

“You see, ultimately, we could not determine what should be done with them.”

They were in the reception room of the house of Friedland’s mayor.

In the chair in the center of the room sat someone clad in garments the likes of which the Friedlanders had never seen. She looked like a ten-year-old girl, but her speech and behavior could be surprising; just when you thought she spoke like a regular child, she would say something that sounded exceptionally haughty or archaic.

It was Ulrike, of course.

Beside her were the two priests and two knights who had ventured to Rostruch—Luman and the others were standing with their hands tied. They were being treated like complete criminals, but considering that the crime they were being punished for was deceiving a god, this actually represented a tremendous mercy.

Had Ulrike and Yggdra’s other familiars escorted them here? The familiars were all connected to each other, and by using “intermediaries,” they could move even when at a distance from Yggdra. Even at this moment, there was a whole line of familiars standing at set distances, stretching from Friedland to Rostruch.

“…I’m getting awfully tired of the lot of you,” Fiona said, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed.

As acting mayor, it was she who had welcomed Ulrike and invited her into the house. As she learned the details of what had happened with Ulrike and Yukinari, her face grew more and more rigid until, by the end, she was looking at the prisoners was absolute contempt. Especially the two surviving priests.

“So let me get this straight. You tried to murder Yukinari by getting him into a fight with this erdgod, Yggdra. But he showed up before you had poured enough poison in Yggdra’s ear, so you just tried to rush ahead with your plan?”

“It sounds like once they had Yggdra on their side, they meant to take Dasa or Berta hostage and force me to come to Rostruch,” Yukinari said, shrugging.

As far as it went, the priests’ plot to make the two fight had worked, and if there had been hostages involved, it was hard to imagine they ever would have sat down and talked.

“Master Luman…”

Berta stood beside Yukinari, looking sadly at Luman. He had been like a father to her. No matter what the facts might be, there was a part of her

that couldn’t bring itself to view him with the distaste the others did, to hate him.

Luman made no move to respond, just stared expressionlessly at the floor. He appeared already resigned to his fate.

“What shall we do? Yukinari has interceded for their lives, and while I did fight with him because of the misunderstanding sown by these people, as a result I gained a new ‘friend.’”

“‘Friend’?” Fiona said, looking at Yukinari in surprise.

“Even gods need friends, I guess,” he said with a slight grin. Fiona didn’t say anything, but grinned back.

From Yggdra’s perspective, Yukinari could best be called not so much a “companion” as a “friend.” Both of them were technically “inhuman,” as they both had human form but stood outside of human society. Yukinari was no erdgod, and he certainly wasn’t a giant tree, so he probably would have objected to being called Yggdra’s kin, too.

“But we can’t very well *not* punish them,” Fiona said. “If we let them go free, they might just do the same thing again. And next time they might not pick a god who’s so ready to make nice.”

“Uh, on that note,” Yukinari said, scratching his cheek in embarrassment. “I’m sorry you had to drag these guys all the way out here, but could you take these two priests—and all the others we’ve got left in Friedland—back to Rostruch?”

Fiona was the first to offer a wide-eyed sound of disbelief. But it must have caught the two priests off-guard, too, because they looked at each other.

“To what purpose?” Ulrike asked.

“I’m not just trying to foist some troublemakers on you,” Yukinari said with a shrug. “Your town never had priests or shrine maidens or anything, because you never needed them. Familiars filled those roles, and as far as offering living sacrifices to Yggdra, it really was just an offering, so the people took care of it themselves.”

“What you say is true, but…”

“But now you’re going from living sacrifices to worship, the periodic collection of spiritual power from the townspeople, right? I think you should let the priests handle those rituals.”

Luman and his fellow priest looked at Yukinari in absolute disbelief.

“For better or for worse, they’ve got centuries of experience with that sort of thing,” Yukinari said. “They know how to handle it. I’m sure there’s a lot of little tricks you wouldn’t guess if you’d never done it before. I hate to admit it, but I sure don’t have any idea how to run a worship service.” Then he looked at Luman. “I don’t guess you really care which god you serve?”

“No, I… I suppose not.”

Erdgods weren’t replaced often, but it did happen. What the priests served was not so much a specific deity as the whole system of worship. It was an industry, in its own way, and the priests were specialists.

“’Course, you’ll have to figure out what it means to worship Yggdra, and how the people of Rostruch want to do it. But I guess all I can say on that score is, good luck. Even I’m not softhearted enough to let you off without so much as a slap on the wrist.”

At first Luman said nothing, looking at Yukinari vacantly. Then he managed, “Not at all. I would judge you quite generous. Very generous indeed.”

“Ah, come off it.”

“…Very well. We’re hardly in a position to refuse.”

Then… Luman smiled. It was probably the first genuine emotion Yukinari had ever seen from the priest. He returned a rueful grin of his own, then turned to Ulrike.

“Now, about trade between us…”

“Mm,” Ulrike replied, placing her right hand over her chest. “The mayor has given me authority to negotiate on that subject.”

“Earlier, you talked about how you could put familiars at set intervals—do you think Yggdra could leave a chain of familiars between Friedland and Rostruch all the time?”

Ulrike went completely silent. About the time Yukinari and the others were starting to worry that something was wrong, she clapped her hands and nodded.

“Ahh! This is one of those times, isn’t it? I’m supposed to laugh.”

“Sorry?”

“Ahhh ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Yukinari watched the girl laugh for a moment in befuddlement, but her expression soon returned to normal, and she raised one hand as if making a declaration.

“Pardon—I mean, sorry. I am not laughing at you, you see. I had intended to offer such a suggestion myself. It amused me that we both had the same idea.”

“We did, did we?”

“If my offspring will be coming and going, it will be necessary to protect those who travel the roads. Sending them with bodyguards is one solution, but I think leaving familiars at set intervals will prove a better deterrent.”

Yggdra was an erdgod. To the extent that the familiars were a part of her, xenobeasts and demigods were unlikely to come near them, since these creatures possessed only a fraction of the familiars’ strength. And as Yukinari had discovered, although the familiars had once been humans, they now had superhuman abilities, including control of nearby plant life. Even if a trade convoy was attacked, if they could make it back to the vicinity of one of Yggdra’s familiars, there was a good chance they would be safe.

Suddenly, though, Ulrike looked questioningly at Yukinari. “But, Yukinari, are you sure this is all right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Might some not think that I, the erdgod Yggdra, am simply attempting to extend my control to Friedland? My familiars are a part of me. I am essentially planting my ‘seeds’ in this area, strengthening my connection to it, and—”

“What’s that? You say you want to take care of Friedland for me, too?”

This left Ulrike speechless, or perhaps dumbfounded.

“Well, you won’t hear any complaints from me,” Yukinari said. “Or don’t you guys like that idea?”

Yukinari looked back at Fiona, but the whole course of the conversation had proven so unexpected that she seemed to have her hands full just trying to follow along.

“I’ve got to admit, I’m not sure,” she said. “I guess... Personally, I think I want Yukinari to be the erdgod of this land. That’s all.”

“...Very well,” Ulrike said, raising her hand once more. “I harbor no thought of stealing what belongs to my friend. Yukinari is and shall remain the god of this land. I shall give him my aid, and no more. Objections?”

“None here. Thank you,” Fiona said politely.

“And that just leaves...”

Everyone turned their gazes on the two knights who stood to Ulrike’s right.

“We got back the weapons they somehow managed to take from the storehouse,” Fiona said. “But if these two set their minds to causing trouble, it could be a real problem.”

The missionaries—one young man and one middle-aged—predictably said nothing.

Perhaps they had already settled their resolve. Five of the knights who had accompanied the priests to Rostruch had been eaten by xenobeasts on the way, and if Ulrike hadn’t rescued them, these two would surely be dead as well. Begging for their lives at this point would hardly make sense.

“Missionary knights of the Harris Church,” Yukinari said. “I gather their friends did a lot to help keep the town safe. And it was one of their little toys that came and got me, right? Gotta admit, it’s kind of hard to be angry at them.”

“True enough,” Fiona said with a sigh. “And I guess the plan to make Yukinari and Lord Yggdra fight was really all the priests’ doing. These guys were just along as bodyguards. Even if they probably did know what the priests had in mind.”

“I guess we could just leave their rap sheet at good old-fashioned breaking and entering. How about that?” Yukinari said.

“I don’t love having to compromise here,” Fiona said, “but that might be best.”

The knights seem to find this unexpected, because they looked at each other doubtfully.

“H-Hey, ‘Blue Angel,’” the younger one said, and Yukinari raised an eyebrow in response. “You’ll regret this! Our faith is stronger than a rock, our ideals higher than the clouds! If you think this will soften us—”

“I don’t.”

In the blink of an eye, Durandall, which had been holstered across Yukinari’s back, was pointed at the young knight’s nose. He had drawn it too quickly for anyone to see—even the knight at whom he was pointing it. It was almost as if a moment of time had simply dropped away.

“Frankly, I hate everyone in the Church. If someone said I could kill every last one of you and get away with it, I’d do it. I hate religion in general, and I especially hate the religion that killed the person I owe my life to.”

His pronouncement would have been a shock to Friedland at that moment. After all, he was their actual god. He was above all laws and all reason. He could kill anyone he wanted on a whim, and no one would object.

“Then… why?” the young knight growled.

During that first battle, Yukinari could easily have slaughtered all of the missionaries. When the Blue Angel had run amok in the capital, he had, in fact, murdered more than a few. And now he held back from killing them?

Why?

“…Dunno. I don’t think I could tell you myself.”

And with that, Yukinari put his weapon away.

●

“Worthless…” Arlen muttered, sitting in front of the hovel of a church and staring vacantly into the distance.

It had been three days since the demigod attacked, and so far Arlen and the other knights of the Missionary Order hadn’t been put back to work, perhaps because parts of the town were still in shambles. With Clifton and his accomplice gone, though, the work was likely to be that much harder when it did resume.

“Grr. Why should I, of all people…”

He was of noble heritage. He was a knight. And now he was supposed to accept life as a slave? It was a humiliation he could hardly bear. It made it difficult to forget the sense of fulfillment he’d felt during the fight with the demigod. It had been the one time recently when he’d felt like a knight again.

On reflection, that was the first time he had ever fought to protect someone. The Civilizing Expedition inevitably found itself battling to subdue angry locals. The statue of the guardian saint had given them the power to overwhelm any opponent in a series of one-sided battles.

The battle with the demigod had been the complete opposite. Arlen and his companions alone had lacked any chance of victory, and if they had flagged for a moment, they would have been killed before Yukinari could arrive. There had been no place to ask any quarter.

And yet, even so, it had been truly—

“Mister…”

It took a moment for Arlen to realize the voice was addressing him.

“Mister?”

He looked up with a frown to find three little girls standing in front of him.

“You country bumpkins really don’t know anything, do you!” he exclaimed. “I’m still too young to be ‘mister’ anything! You lot are unutterably—”

“…Um, hmm…”

The children looked at each other, frightened.

“You may address me as Lord Lansdowne,” he said.

“Um… Mister Lord Lansdowne…”

“Drop the ‘mister’!” he shouted. The girls trembled, but for some reason, they made no move to run.

“So,” he said more calmly, “what do you want?”

“Um.” The girl in the middle of the group took a step forward, speaking for all of them. “Thanks.”

“Thanks?”

The word jogged his memory: Arlen finally realized that the girls standing in front of him were the ones he had saved when the demigod attacked, by pitching them into the storehouse.

“Ah… Hm.” He nodded, feeling just a little confused. Now that he thought about it, out of all the places he had been as a missionary, no one had ever thanked him before. Or rather, they had—but it was only out of fear for the immense power of the True Church of Harris. A social nicety. But the heartfelt gratitude of these children was something new.

“Well, you may thank me to your heart’s content.”

“Uh huh! Thank you, Mister Lord Lansdowne!”

“I told you—ahh, forget it,” he said with a sigh. He waved his right hand as if to shoo the girls away. But suddenly, his hand stopped. The girls had reached out their own small hands and taken his.

“Thank you.”

They were shaking his hand. Up and down. Arlen didn’t say anything for a moment, but only blinked at them.

And then they ran off with a “See you!”, and he was left staring dumbfoundedly after them.

Then he looked down at his hand.

He didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Disgusting.”

The judgment came very suddenly.

“Hrm?” Arlen looked up to find two new people standing in front of him. “Blue Angel…!”

It was Yukinari, and Dasa was with him.

It was Dasa who had issued the verdict of “disgusting.” It was an instinctual terror of the Blue Angel that brought Arlen halfway to his feet, but even as he rose he was shouting angrily:

“Who are you calling disgusting?! I—”

“Shaking hands with… little girls, and then smirking… at your hand.”

“…Huh?” Arlen pointed to himself in surprise; it was only when Dasa pointed it out that he realized he’d been smiling.

“The Harris missionaries prefer kids, huh?” Yukinari said.

“You watch your tongue!” Arlen growled. But he immediately blanched as he remembered who—or what—he was talking to. The Blue Angel was a homunculus, an artificial human created by the Church. It looked human, but it was a monster that had destroyed erdgods, demigods, and even the guardian statue, allegedly the Church’s most powerful weapon.

If the angel felt like it, it could kill Arlen with a single touch—no exaggeration, literally just one finger. Make it angry, and your life might instantly be forfeit. That was what it meant to confront a god.

But then…

“You’ve got my gratitude, too,” Yukinari said. “Thanks.”

“What…?”

“Fiona told me how you protected her, and those kids, and pretty much the entire town. I mean, while I was away.”

“Well… I was just…”

It had always been one of the duties of the Missionary Order. It didn’t contradict his creed in any way. It wasn’t some sign that he was turning his back on the Church and cozying up to the Blue Angel. Absolutely not.

“I’ve got an idea for you.”

“What’s that?” Arlen frowned. Yukinari gestured in the direction of the town gate.

“We’ll be opening trade with Rostruch soon. Their erdgod said she would send familiars to help protect the route from demigods and xenobeasts, but I doubt it’s really going to be enough. It would be a load off my mind if the trade delegation were made up of people who actually knew how to fight.”

“What are you saying…?”

“I’m saying we’ll give you guys back your weapons, if you agree to make regular trips between Friedland and Rostruch as an armed trading party.”

Arlen could only stare dumbly at Yukinari. What was this monster trying to say? Agreeing to this would practically make him…

“Plus, we’re planning on expanding the amount of farmland around here,” Yukinari went on. “And that means people are going to be at more risk of getting attacked by demigods or xenobeasts. When you guys aren’t conducting trade, it would be a big help if you could patrol the fields and help keep everyone safe. That was pretty much what you were planning to do after you killed the erdgod anyway, right?”

“Ahem…”

It was, strictly speaking, true.

“Are… Are you asking me to become one of your believers?! Me, a knight of the glorious True Church of Harris?! And are you suggesting that I should follow you—the one who murdered his Holiness, the former Dominus Doctrinae?!”

“No,” Yukinari said flatly. “You don’t have to worship me to do any of this.” He went on, “I hate religion, anyway. Even if I did somehow wind up literally playing god. I don’t want to worship, and I don’t want to be worshipped. You can believe in whatever you want, worship whoever you feel like. And if it happened to motivate you to help watch out for this town, that would be great.”

Arlen had no answer.

“Well, think about it.”

With a wave, Yukinari and Dasa turned around and started walking away.

Arlen found himself stretching out his hand, as if to say, *Wait*.

But he didn’t speak.

He glanced at his hand. He almost thought he could still feel the girls’ small fingers around it. Arlen let out a quiet sigh.

●

Trade between Friedland and Rostruch commenced several days later. A variety of goods from each town had been sent to the other as a sort of test, a chance to evaluate what was available, and now both sides were preparing lists of what they would be willing to trade for.

That was what Fiona was currently working on. Finding out what the townspeople wanted was truly a job for the deputy mayor. Yukinari couldn’t do this work using his “angel” powers, and if he tried to help, he would only have slowed her down.

That first trade mission had been carried out by Arlen and three other knights. They brought the huge wagon that had originally carried the statue of the guardian saint, and each of them had been fully armed and armored for the round trip between Friedland and Rostruch. For now, at least, there hadn’t been any problems.

And Yukinari…

“So far it seems to be pretty much working, I guess.”

In a corner of his “sanctuary,” he let out a breath.

Dasa was there. Berta was there. So far as that went, everything was normal. But…

“Why are *you* here?” Dasa demanded.

“Am I not allowed to be here?” The puzzled response came from… Ulrike.

“Fine by me,” Yukinari said, but then as his gaze drifted to Dasa he added, “Uh, I mean, I think…” The little sister of the alchemist to whom Yukinari was so indebted was glaring steadily at him from behind her glasses. She didn’t have to say anything to make her displeasure obvious. Nor the reason for it.

“You *are* Yggdra’s familiar, though,” Yukinari said. “You sure it’s okay for you to be here?”

“It is you who said I should stay, Yukinari.” She almost sounded a touch exasperated that this was coming up only now.

“Me?”

“You suggested a chain of familiars stretching from here to Rostruch.”

“Well, I mean, I guess I did say that, yeah…”

“And this is a good place. Easy to connect with the intervening familiars.” Ulrike touched the horns—no, the branches—growing from her head. They seemed to work like antennas. Or maybe…

“Those’re basically cell phones, huh?”

“Cell… phones…?”

“Nothing. Forget I said anything.” Yukinari shook his head.

“What’s more, this is a sign of my thoughtfulness,” Ulrike went on. “I’m allowing Ulrike’s personality to remain predominant, in accord with your preferences. You have some objection?”

“My *preferences*? What are you—?” He could feel Dasa’s stare growing more and more intense. He let out a sigh.

“Um, Lord Yukinari, do you really prefer such young children…?” Berta asked anxiously.

“Nobody said anything like that! *I* sure didn’t. Yggdra is just leaving Ulrike front and center, because otherwise the two of us talk past each other sometimes. Right?” He looked to Dasa for confirmation.

“Yuki…”

But she continued to look at him with undisguised contempt.

“Yes? What is it, Dasa?”

“Womanizer.”

“What? She’s not a woman, she’s a kid—hell, she’s a *plant*! There’s no way I’d ever…”

Dasa said nothing.

“Ahh, fine, I’m sorry,” Yukinari said with a hint of desperation. “For whatever it is. Call me a womanizer, I don’t care.”

“Hm? Yukinari. Is this true? Have you developed romantic feelings for my familiar?” Ulrike said with a quizzical look.

“No! Absolutely not!”

“We prepare for the next generation largely in isolation, but I hear that among animals, this is not the case. They must mate with a member of the

opposite sex. Truly a fascinating phenomenon. If you indeed have a romantic interest in Ulrike, I would be most curious to—”

“Why would a plant be interested in animal biology?!” Yukinari cried.

The erdgod Yggdra had a plant “core,” which had absorbed the collective knowledge of the people sacrificed to her, and was now allowing Ulrike’s personality to stay front and center—and somewhere along the line, the point of the conversation had gotten mangled.

Yukinari felt it was a good thing he had managed to become friends with her—*her* being a pronoun he used for convenience when referring to the erdgod—but being the subject of sexual advances from a plant was not on the list of things he had ever expected would happen to him in his life.

“Well, I guess anything can happen with erdgods…”

Relations between totally different types of beings were not unusual in mythology. That was how it had been in Yukinari’s previous world, and it was probably the same here, where gods literally walked the earth.

“Be that as it may. I am told the people of Friedland will build a shrine to me just nearby, and most likely, Ulrike will move there. Until then, your life here shall become somewhat crowded. I hope you will all get along.”

“…Is that right?”

“I knew you were a… womanizer, Yuki.”

“Yeah, sure.” He couldn’t escape Dasa’s judgment. “I guess I’m one of those womanizing gods… Sheesh!”

So, for the time being, this land had a god—something which, in this world, was apparently altogether unremarkable.

Afterword

Hello, hello. Your humble author, Sakaki, here.

Presenting *Bluesteel Blasphemer*, Volume 2!

Happily, a certain number of readers bought Volume 1, and I was able to go on to do this continuation. So the first people I want to thank are my returning readers from the first outing.

Now then. About Volume 2.

Initially, the concept of *Bluesteel Blasphemer* was “other-world cheat harem with guns.” This was really more at the instigation of my dear editor than it was my own idea. I’m a gun nut, and that was pretty much precisely the reason we started in the rather odd direction of including guns in the story; there was a certain sense—call it self-preservation, maybe—that had more or less prevented me from suggesting any “gun action” plots myself.

Nonetheless, my editor, K-shi, was in favor of an “other-world cheat harem + gun action” story. Here, a problem arose.

“Look, but if it’s the gun that makes this guy special—well, any character with the same weapon could be just as special as him. That’s not much of a cheat, is it? It wouldn’t be the main character who was strong, it would be the gun. Plus, guns break a lot, and then you need the parts to repair them. Having just one gun wouldn’t do you much good in this ‘other world.’”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right about that.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t consider some other angle for the main character’s cheat?”

“Hmm. You know what there’s not many of? Other-world *Kamen R*der*s.”

“Oh, there aren’t?”

“You don’t see it too often—a series were the main character is transported to another world and then ‘altered.’”

“Being altered kind of defeats the point of being transported to another world in the first place.”

“You may be right.”

This went on for a while. But the point is, eventually we decided to just give the *Kamen R*der* thing a whirl, so Yukinari would be altered (or rather, his body would be re-created, so I guess that makes him more of a *Cassh*rn*?), and then fight against the people who made him that way.

“So, what with the *Kamen Rid*r* connection, in Volume 2 I decided to have a motorcycle [even though it actually has four wheels].”

“…That’s going to be rough on Akai-san [because motorcycles are notoriously difficult to design and draw].”

“True… I suppose it will.”

“…We’ll just have to ask him to grin and bear it.”
“I guess we will.”
And boy, did he ever bear it.
Incidentally, there is an actual vehicle that has four wheels but is motorcycle-ish. It looks nothing like what Akai-san ended up drawing for us, though. It’s a concept vehicle called the Yamaha Tesseract.

However!
Concerning the additional heroine we gain in this volume.
I’m not sure how to say this, but I didn’t exactly think super hard about the outline of this volume before I started writing. I just had these vague ideas that “the winner would become humanity’s greatest enemy” and “Yasuko Sawaguchi’s face will appear in the sky.” You know, the kinds of things an obsessive fan of *tokusatsu* shows would think.

“Sakaki-san. The designs from Akai-san are in.”
“Ooh. Let me see… A young girl, huh?”
“Uh-huh, a young girl.”
“And in a very Japanese style, huh?”
“Uh-huh, practically a shrine maiden.”
“Suppose that’s okay?”
“I suppose that’s okay.”
“…Well, there you have it.”
“…Okay. Sure.”
As a result of these detailed discussions with my editor, K-shi, I revised my draft of the book to reflect an inhuman young girl who talks like an old person and is otherwise kind of the *lolicon* type, but also has a certain sense of justice. So, all my readers, what did you think? I hope you enjoyed the book.

2015/8/5

……But [looking at the cover illustration], considering the design of the covers for Volumes 1 and 2, does this mean I’ll have to introduce a new heroine in every volume? [Spoken as if there were anyone to answer that question but me.]

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue: From Death, Life

Chapter One: After a God Dies

Chapter Two: Another Land’s God

Chapter Three: A God’s Homecoming

Chapter Four: The One Sent by a God

Afterword
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Bluesteel Blasphemer Volume 2
by Ichirou Sakaki
Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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